



# Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 28 JAN 2022

	International	National	Regional and Local
<b>Events, Opportunities</b> <a href="#">Go to articles</a>	<a href="#">01/28 Gaps persist despite 10B vaccine doses</a> <a href="#">01/28 Australia suffers deadliest day of pandemic</a> <a href="#">01/28 New mutant omicron most contagious yet?</a> <a href="#">01/28 New discord between Ukraine, US</a> <a href="#">01/28 Russia: won't start war; tensions build</a> <a href="#">01/28 US, Germany pipeline warnings to Russia</a> <a href="#">01/28 US reaffirms 'decisive' backing for Ukraine</a> <a href="#">01/28 Intelligence 'prebutter' Russia false claims</a> <a href="#">01/28 NKorea confirms latest missile tests</a> <a href="#">01/28 Storm: southern Africa national disasters</a> <a href="#">01/28 IMF: China economic imbalances worsened</a> <a href="#">01/27 Covid curbs eased further in Europe</a> <a href="#">01/27 India schools stay closed; hope fades</a> <a href="#">01/27 India cases plateau but omicron surges</a> <a href="#">01/27 Covid cases inside Beijing Olympics bubble</a> <a href="#">01/27 US appeals to Putin's 'legacy'</a> <a href="#">01/27 Russia medical units to Ukraine front</a> <a href="#">01/27 US, NATO military moves as message</a> <a href="#">01/27 Europe enlists US help for securing gas</a> <a href="#">01/27 Rwanda to reopen Uganda border</a> <a href="#">01/27 Chinese language school northern Iraq</a> <a href="#">01/27 Honduras first female president sworn in</a> <a href="#">01/27 China \$4B on Olympics; longer term goal</a>	<a href="#">01/27 When is Covid-19 pandemic over?</a> <a href="#">01/27 What is the omicron variant BA.2?</a> <a href="#">01/27 CDC: 3<sup>rd</sup> shots reduce risk of hospitalization</a> <a href="#">01/27 Stocks higher after wild ride</a> <a href="#">01/27 Federal court revokes oil, gas leases</a> <a href="#">01/27 Economy grows but obstacles persist</a> <a href="#">01/27 Economic expansion biggest since 1984</a> <a href="#">01/27 GAO: HHS failing to meet responsibilities</a> <a href="#">01/27 Record number ACA health plan sign-ups</a> <a href="#">01/27 FCC revokes China Unicom license in US</a> <a href="#">01/27 Vast troves classified info harms security</a> <a href="#">01/27 Pentagon defends preparation for Ukraine</a> <a href="#">01/27 Military unable to investigate civilian deaths</a> <a href="#">01/27 Struggle: police departments losing officers</a> <a href="#">01/27 EPA tackles environmental injustices</a> <a href="#">01/27 BLM's \$millions go unaccounted for</a> <a href="#">01/27 Apple AirTags used to stalk people</a> <a href="#">01/27 East coast braces for snow again</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Free N95 masks at pharmacies, grocers</a> <a href="#">01/27 Jobless claims fall for 3<sup>rd</sup> straight week</a> <a href="#">01/27 More 5G, fog cancellations at Paine Field</a> <a href="#">01/27 Sound Transit 'financially unstable' path</a> <a href="#">01/27 Seattle rental market no signs of cooling</a> <a href="#">01/27 Costs jump for Highway 520 bridge work</a> <a href="#">01/27 WSP cuts psychologist in hiring decisions</a> <a href="#">01/27 Regional homelessness authority kicks off</a>
<b>Cyber Awareness</b> <a href="#">Go to articles</a>	<a href="#">01/28 Britain: brace for Russia cyberattacks</a> <a href="#">01/27 REvil operations unaffected by arrests?</a> <a href="#">01/27 BlackCat ransomware: high victim count</a> <a href="#">01/27 LockBit strikes govt., Europe businesses</a> <a href="#">01/27 Taiwan electronics firm cyberattack victim</a> <a href="#">01/27 Hacker flags flaws in Swiss railway system</a> <a href="#">01/27 Undetected years: Russian APT29 malware</a> <a href="#">01/27 Subscription fraud campaign Android users</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Water supply absolutely vulnerable</a> <a href="#">01/27 Data breach Florida drug screening lab</a> <a href="#">01/27 Shipment delivery scams spoof couriers</a> <a href="#">01/27 Microsoft: record breaking DDoS attacks</a> <a href="#">01/27 Lazarus hackers exploit Windows update</a> <a href="#">01/27 FTC: social media fraud losses skyrocket</a> <a href="#">01/27 No 911? Sheriff halts Facebook comments</a> <a href="#">01/27 Ransom gangs target breached individuals</a> <a href="#">01/27 New phishing uses unusual trick to spread</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Vandals rip businesses internet, phones</a>
<b>Terror Conditions</b> <a href="#">Go to articles</a>	<a href="#">01/28 Officials: 3 rockets hit near Baghdad airport</a> <a href="#">01/27 Kurdish-led militia still fighting IS in prison</a> <a href="#">01/27 France warns: imminent attack in Kenya</a> <a href="#">01/27 Denmark pulls troops out of Mali</a>	<a href="#">01/27 ISIS wannabe jail sentenced reduced</a> <a href="#">01/27 Afghan evacuee camp costs: who pays?</a> <a href="#">01/27 Military told to protect civilians from harm</a> <a href="#">01/27 ISIS beaten? Not yet, fighting still in prison</a>	
<b>Suspicious, Unusual</b> <a href="#">Go to articles</a>	<a href="#">01/28 West accused of 'climate hypocrisy'</a> <a href="#">01/27 Winter storms bring snow to parts Mideast</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Study: gas stoves worse for climate</a> <a href="#">01/27 Hottest city nearly unlivable in summer?</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Runaway train car travels 16 miles</a>
<b>Crime, Criminals</b> <a href="#">Go to articles</a>	<a href="#">01/28 Seoul charges fiery NKorea defector</a> <a href="#">01/27 Mexico resort town 2<sup>nd</sup> deadly shooting</a> <a href="#">01/27 Jordan's army kills 27 in border drug bust</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Police: 5 shot in northwest D.C. hotel</a> <a href="#">01/27 Houston: 3 officers injured in shooting</a> <a href="#">01/27 Possible 6<sup>th</sup> victim to 1970s serial killer</a> <a href="#">01/27 Man groped flight attendant; jailed 6mo.</a>	<a href="#">01/27 Spanaway: deadly shooting mall parking lot</a> <a href="#">01/27 KCSO: 3 of 5 escaped teens caught</a> <a href="#">01/27 Report: Echo Glen facility short staffed</a> <a href="#">01/27 Escaped convicted teen murderer caught</a> <a href="#">01/27 Tacoma businesses fed up with crime</a> <a href="#">01/27 More Tacoma fires added to arson probe</a>

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

## Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/28 Gaps persist despite 10B vaccine doses
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#covid-vaccines-10-billion-doses">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/28/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#covid-vaccines-10-billion-doses</a>
GIST	When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel rolled up his sleeve in December 2020 to receive a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, kicking off one of the world's first mass rollouts of Covid shots, he declared that it marked "the beginning of the end" of the pandemic.

Thirteen months later, his prediction has proved [far from true](#), but 10 billion vaccine doses have been administered globally, a milestone that reflects the astonishing speed with which governments and drug companies have mobilized, allowing many nations to envision a near future in which their people coexist with the virus but aren't confined by it.

The milestone, reached on Friday, [according to the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford](#), has not been arrived at equitably, even though 10 billion doses could theoretically have meant at least one shot for all of the world's 7.9 billion people.

In the wealthiest countries, 77 percent of people have received at least one dose, whereas in low-income countries the figure is less than 10 percent. As North America and Europe race to overcome Omicron surges by offering boosters, with some nations even [contemplating a fourth shot](#), more than one-third of the world's people, many of them in Africa and poor pockets of Asia, are still waiting for a first dose.

The United States has administered five times as many extra shots — about 85 million — than the total number of doses administered in all of Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation.

"Ten billion doses is a triumph of science but a complete failure of global solidarity," said Madhukar Pai, a professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at McGill University in Montreal.

And not all vaccines are the same. Those made in China have [shown to be less effective](#) than the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. And while nearly all of the world's Covid vaccines protect against severe illness, early research suggests that [most offer little protection against infection from Omicron](#).

The consequences of the vaccine gap have been highlighted by Omicron, which was first identified in southern Africa. Low vaccination coverage creates conditions for widespread virus circulation and with that the possibility of new variants emerging.

The disparities remain even as Covax, the global vaccine sharing initiative that facilitates distribution of donations from rich nations, increases its deliveries. After a slow start because of hoarding by rich nations and large outbreaks that prompted export blockages, Covax said this month that it had delivered its billionth dose — though that is less than half of its initial target.

[Misinformation on social media](#) and mistrust of government and pharmaceutical companies has fed into vaccine hesitancy in many countries. Even where people are willing to be inoculated, delivering doses to far-flung areas with [poor health infrastructure has been challenging](#).

Thomas Hale, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Oxford, said that in sub-Saharan Africa, "We're seeing pretty good vaccination rates in cities and capitals, where vaccines tend to land, but that supply runs headfirst into the general challenges of building stronger health systems in these countries."

High-income nations have announced initiatives to assist, including the Global Covid Corps, a [U.S. government program](#) to help countries overcome logistical and delivery hurdles. But experts say that another monumental challenge is that rich countries have failed to agree on waiving intellectual property restrictions on vaccines, and have not put pressure on drug companies to share their technology so that poorer nations can manufacture doses locally.

South Africa, for example, has set up a hub to begin developing mRNA vaccines where scientists, [with the backing of the W.H.O.](#), are trying to reverse-engineer the Moderna vaccine from scratch, because the U.S. drugmaker won't share its technology.

Dr. Pai likened this to reinventing the wheel while a car is on fire.

	“We have learned through this pandemic that charity does not work in global health, and charity is not the same as justice,” he said. “And that is what countries are looking for — a just approach to be able to save themselves.”
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 NKorea confirms latest missile tests</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/01/28/Kim-Jong-Un-missile-tests-ballistic-cruise-tactical-guided-missile-munitions-factory/4021643353262/">https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/01/28/Kim-Jong-Un-missile-tests-ballistic-cruise-tactical-guided-missile-munitions-factory/4021643353262/</a>
GIST	<p>SEOUL, Jan. 28 (UPI) -- North Korea said that it successfully tested tactical guided missiles and long-range cruise missiles in a pair of launches this week, while leader Kim Jong Un called for a boost to the country's weapons program during a visit to a munitions factory, state-run media reported Friday.</p> <p>On Thursday, Pyongyang launched a pair of surface-to-surface tactical guided missiles that "precisely hit the target island" and confirmed the "explosive power of the conventional warhead," according to a report by Korean Central News Agency.</p> <p>South Korea's <a href="#">military said</a> that the missiles were fired from an east coast location and traveled roughly 118 miles at an altitude of 12 miles.</p> <p>Analysts later <a href="#">identified the missiles</a> as North Korea's KN-23, a version of the Russian Iskander, from images released by state media.</p> <p>North Korea also <a href="#">confirmed reports</a> from the South Korean military that it fired a pair of long-range cruise missiles on Tuesday.</p> <p>The missiles traveled a distance of approximately 1,120 miles over a period of two hours and 32 minutes and hit a target island in the sea between Korea and Japan, KCNA said.</p> <p>"The practical combat performance of the long-range cruise missile system would hold a reliable share in boosting the war deterrence of the country," the report added.</p> <p>The secretive regime has conducted six weapons tests since the beginning of the year, marking its busiest month under Kim Jong Un and drawing repeated condemnations from the international community.</p> <p>Kim visited a munitions factory "producing a major weapon system," KCNA said in a separate report on Friday, where he "learned in detail about the recent modernization of technology and production processes."</p> <p>No details about the location of the factory or the weapons it manufactures were given.</p> <p>Kim, who was joined on the trip by his influential sister Kim Yo Jong and senior party officials, touted the plant's "collective innovation and leaping progress in producing major weapons," according to KCNA.</p> <p>Factory workers and officials lauded Kim for "smash[ing] with his bold pluck the challenges of the U.S. imperialists and their vassal forces that try to violate in every direction our Republic's right to self-defense," the report said.</p> <p>In an address last week, Kim called for North Korea to bolster its military capacity to face "the hostile policy and military threat by the U.S.," and suggested that Pyongyang <a href="#">may lift a self-imposed moratorium</a> on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests that has been in place for more than four years.</p> <p>Pyongyang has defended its missile tests as a legitimate exercise of its right to self-defense, while criticizing Seoul and Washington for conducting joint military exercises and bringing their own high-tech weapons systems to the Peninsula.</p>

	<p>The regime has bristled under continued international sanctions and is resisting any efforts to restart stalled negotiations with the United States over its nuclear program.</p> <p>Earlier this month, Washington leveled sanctions on six North Korean individuals, along with a Russian individual and company, over ties to Pyongyang's weapons program. The United States last week led a call for the U.N. Security Council to blacklist five of the North Koreans, but the <a href="#">proposal was blocked</a> by Russia and China.</p> <p>The Pentagon condemned North Korea's latest launches Thursday as "destabilizing behavior."</p> <p>"We continue to call on the North Korean regime to stop these provocations, which in many cases, violate existing U.N. Security Council resolutions," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby <a href="#">said</a> at a press briefing.</p> <p>The European Union also issued a <a href="#">statement</a> Thursday, calling on North Korea to "cease destabilizing actions and respond constructively to the readiness for dialogue expressed by the United States and [South Korea]."</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 Australia suffers deadliest day of pandemic</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/australia-drugs-regulator-approves-covid-19-boosters-16-17-year-olds-2022-01-27/">https://www.reuters.com/world/australia-drugs-regulator-approves-covid-19-boosters-16-17-year-olds-2022-01-27/</a>
GIST	<p>SYDNEY, Jan 28 (Reuters) - Australia suffered its deadliest day of the COVID-19 pandemic on Friday with nearly 100 deaths, but several large states said they expect hospital admissions to fall amid hopes that the latest wave of infections would begin to subside.</p> <p>Fuelled by the fast-spreading Omicron variant, infections exploded during the past four weeks, with around two million cases recorded. Up until then, Australia had counted just 400,000 cases since the pandemic first hit the country nearly two years ago.</p> <p>But steady hospitalisation rates in recent days have raised hopes that worst could be over.</p> <p>"Generally the situation is stable ... and we're expecting further falls (in hospital cases)," Queensland state Chief Health Officer John Gerrard said during a media briefing, as hospital cases in the state fell for the third straight day to 818.</p> <p>But he warned the state's 5 million residents that the pandemic was far from over. "So don't go out and celebrate yet but the news at this stage is good," he said.</p> <p>Hospitalisations have remained steady at around 5,000 for the last few days, peaking at just under 5,400 on Tuesday.</p> <p>Fresh modelling released by New South Wales, the most populous state, showed the number of people in intensive care units had been below the numbers predicted in a best-case scenario.</p> <p>A total of 98 deaths were registered in Australia by late afternoon on Friday, exceeding the previous pandemic high of 87 two days ago. Just over 40,000 new infections were reported, the lowest daily tally in nearly a month.</p> <p>That takes the 25 million population country's total COVID-19 deaths to 3,500 since the pandemic began, far lower than numbers seen in many comparable countries.</p> <p>Australia is among the most heavily vaccinated countries against COVID-19 with more than 93% of its adult population double-dosed and around two-thirds of eligible Australians having received a booster dose, according to official data.</p>

	The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), the country's drug regulator, on Friday expanded the eligibility for boosters to 16- and 17-year-olds, joining the United States, Israel and Britain.
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

  

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 Russia: won't start war; tensions build</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-joe-biden-united-states-europe-moscow-8593998c182f17caafeb57fe93f7578c">https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-joe-biden-united-states-europe-moscow-8593998c182f17caafeb57fe93f7578c</a>
GIST	<p>MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's top diplomat said Friday that Moscow will not start a war but warned that it wouldn't allow the West to trample on its security interests amid fears it is planning to invade Ukraine.</p> <p>U.S. President Joe Biden warned Ukraine's leader a day earlier that there is a "distinct possibility" that Russia could take military action against its neighbor in February.</p> <p>"There won't be a war as far as it depends on the Russian Federation, we don't want a war," Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a live interview with Russian radio stations. "But we won't let our interests be rudely trampled on and ignored."</p> <p>Tensions have soared in recent weeks, and the United States and its NATO allies worry that a buildup of more than 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine signals that Moscow intends to attack the ex-Soviet state. Russia has repeatedly denied having any such plans, but has demanded that NATO promise Ukraine will never be allowed to join and that the alliance roll back deployments of troops and military equipment in Eastern Europe.</p> <p>The U.S. and NATO formally rejected those demands this week, though Washington outlined areas where discussions are possible, offering hope that there could be a war to avoid war.</p> <p>Russia's official response to those proposals will come from President Vladimir Putin, but the Kremlin has sounded a grim note thus far, saying there is "little ground for optimism."</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin could discuss his reaction to the U.S. rejection with French President Emmanuel Macron during their video call Friday. The Russian leader is also scheduled to chair a meeting of his Security Council later in the day.</p> <p>Lavrov noted Friday that the U.S. suggested the two sides could talk about limits on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles, restrictions on military drills and rules to prevent accidents between warships and aircraft. He said that Russia proposed discussing those issues years ago — but Washington and its allies never took them up on it until now.</p> <p>While he described the U.S. offers for dialogue on confidence-building measures as reasonable, he emphasized that Russia's main concerns are to stop NATO's expansion and the deployment of the alliance weapons near Russia's borders. He noted that international agreements say that the security of one nation must not come at the expense of others' — and that he would send letters to ask his Western counterparts to address that obligation.</p> <p>"It will be hard for them to wiggle out from answering why they aren't fulfilling the obligations sealed by their leaders not to strengthen their security at the expense of others," he said.</p> <p>As tensions build, Washington warned Moscow of devastating sanctions if it invades Ukraine, including penalties targeting top Russian officials and key economic sectors. Several senior U.S. officials also said Thursday that Germany would not allow a newly constructed pipeline — which is meant to bring gas directly from Russia — to begin operations if Russia invades Ukraine.</p> <p>Asked about possible sanctions, Lavrov said that Moscow had warned Washington that their introduction would amount to a complete severing of ties.</p>



	<p>While Moscow and the West are mulling their next steps, NATO said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe.</p> <p>Russia has launched a series of military drills involving motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, and dozens of warships in the Black Sea and the Arctic. Russian troops have also headed to Belarus for sweeping joint drills, raising Western fears that Moscow could stage an attack on Ukraine from the north. The Ukrainian capital is just 75 kilometers (50 miles) from the border with Belarus.</p> <p>Despite the alarming rhetoric, Ukrainian officials have repeatedly tried to project calm.</p> <p>Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told parliament Friday that the total number of Russian troops near Ukraine — about 130,000 — is comparable to Moscow's military buildup in the spring of 2021, when Moscow eventually pulled its forces back after massive military exercises.</p> <p>"We haven't observed any events or actions of military character that significantly differ from what was going on last spring," with the exception of the deployment to Belarus, Reznikov said.</p> <p>But that has so far not reassured many in the West. Biden warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Thursday's call that the U.S. believed there was a high degree of likelihood that Russia could invade when the ground freezes and Russian forces could attack Ukrainian territory from north of Kyiv, according to two people familiar with the conversation who were not authorized to comment publicly.</p> <p>While concerns rise about an invasion, Ukraine is already beset by conflict. Following the 2014 ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backed an insurgency in the country's eastern industrial heartland. Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels has killed over 14,000 people, and efforts to reach a settlement have stalled.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/27 Russia medical units to Ukraine front</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/russia-ukraine-medical-units-military/2022/01/27/id/1054375/">https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/russia-ukraine-medical-units-military/2022/01/27/id/1054375/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Western defense officials reported on Thursday that Moscow is sending medical units to the Ukrainian front, where roughly 100,000 Russian troops are positioned, according to <a href="#">The Wall Street Journal</a>.</p> <p>The Journal notes that Russia previously built up its forces near the borders of Georgia and Ukraine before invading, but the country has also drawn back its forces after major buildups, which keeps Western intelligence groups from determining President Vladimir Putin's plans.</p> <p>"I have no idea whether he's made the ultimate decision, but we certainly see every indication that he is going to use military force sometime, perhaps now and middle of February," Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said earlier this week, according to the Journal.</p> <p>"The U.S. thinks Putin will do a full-blown war. Europeans think he's bluffing," said a senior German official who was not named by the Journal. "Americans are preparing with the sense that it will happen. We don't."</p> <p>A spokesperson for the Kremlin said on Thursday that recent proposals from Washington have not addressed Russia's central demands, noting: "There is not much reason for optimism. It cannot be said that our considerations were taken into account or that any willingness to take into account our concerns was demonstrated."</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/28 Intelligence 'prebuttal' Russia false claims</b>
-----------------	-----------------------------------------------------------

SOURCE	<a href="https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-russia-media-vladimir-putin-ecba20c81181c028b06109cf8620426a">https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-russia-media-vladimir-putin-ecba20c81181c028b06109cf8620426a</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — In a break from the past, the U.S. and its allies are increasingly revealing their intelligence findings as they confront Russian preparations for invading Ukraine, looking to undercut Russian President Vladimir Putin’s plans by exposing them and deflecting his efforts to shape world opinion.</p> <p>The White House in recent weeks publicized what it said was a <a href="#">developing Russian “false-flag” operation</a> to create pretext for an invasion. Britain <a href="#">named specific Ukrainians</a> it accused of having ties to Russian intelligence officers plotting to overthrow President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The U.S. also <a href="#">released a map</a> of Russian military positions and detailed how officials believe Russia will try to attack Ukraine with as many as 175,000 troops.</p> <p>Experts credit the White House for declassifying intelligence and moving to rebut false claims before they’re made — a so-called “prebuttal” that undercuts their effectiveness better than an after-the-fact explanation.</p> <p>But the release of information isn’t without risks. Intelligence assessments carry varying degrees of certainty, and beyond offering photos of troop movements, the U.S. and its allies have provided little other proof. Moscow has dismissed Washington’s claims as hysteria and invoked past American intelligence failures, including false information put forward about Iraq’s weapons programs.</p> <p>There are no clear signs of change so far from Russia, which continues to move forces toward Ukraine and into Belarus, an ally to Ukraine’s north. There is growing pessimism in Washington and London about ongoing diplomatic efforts and a belief that Putin will likely mount some sort of invasion in the next several weeks.</p> <p>Russia is known for using disinformation as a tactic to sow confusion and discord as part of its overall conflict strategy. When Russia invaded Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014, it mounted a campaign to sway ethnic Russian residents of the territory. State media and social media accounts linked to Russia promoted allegations that the West was manipulating protests in Kyiv and false or unconfirmed tales of lurid crimes committed by Ukrainian forces.</p> <p>This time, the U.S. says, Russia is trying to portray Ukrainian leaders as aggressors and to persuade its own citizens to support military action. At the same time, the U.S. and its allies allege, Russia has positioned operatives in eastern Ukraine who could use explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia’s own proxy forces and then blame Kyiv.</p> <p>The White House has repeatedly highlighted what it sees as disinformation and is privately sharing additional intelligence with allies including Ukraine. The State Department recently published a fact sheet listing and rejecting several Russian claims. And the Treasury Department sanctioned four men accused of ties to influence operations intended to set the pretext in Ukraine for a new invasion.</p> <p>White House press secretary Jen Psaki described a “strategic decision to call out disinformation when we see it.”</p> <p>“We are much more cognizant of the Russian disinformation machine than we were in 2014,” she said Wednesday, adding, “We need to be very clear with the global community and the U.S. public what they’re trying to do and why.”</p> <p>Moscow continues to make demands that NATO not accept Ukraine or further expand to any other countries. And after British intelligence accused him of being a possible Russia-backed candidate for president, Ukrainian politician Yevheniy Murayev denied the claim and told the AP that it “looks ridiculous and funny.”</p>

Meanwhile, Washington and Moscow go back and forth online. Kremlin-backed RT.com on Dec. 21 posted a video alleging “US private military companies are amassing CHEMICAL COMPONENTS in Eastern Ukraine.” The State Department rejected that claim in its fact sheet on Russian propaganda. Russia’s Foreign Ministry then responded with tweets “debunking @StateDept ‘facts’ on Russian disinformation on Ukraine.”

Washington’s efforts have raised questions in Kyiv, where Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has taken a different public approach of trying to tamp down public fears of an expanded war even as many Ukrainians prepare for possible combat.

Ukrainian officials privately question why the Biden administration is warning about an impending invasion but not imposing preemptive sanctions or taking action against the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which has been criticized for giving Moscow more leverage over Ukraine and Western Europe. The Biden administration lobbied Democrats in Congress to oppose a Republican-sponsored bill that would have required the imposition of sanctions against the pipeline, which has not yet gone into operation.

The White House has threatened tough sanctions if Russia does invade and is preparing to move forces to NATO’s eastern flank in the event of an invasion. The U.S. and Western allies are also sending weapons and missile systems to Ukraine.

Molly McKew, a writer and lecturer on Russian influence, said the administration’s moves to counter Russia’s influence efforts needed to be accompanied by a clearer statement of American goals and plans to repel any invasion.

Publicly identifying Russia’s actions alone will not stop Russia from carrying them out, said McKew, a former adviser to President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, which fought a war in 2008 with Russia and still is trying to regain control of separatist regions backed by Moscow.

“They’re trying to apply disinformation thinking to military domains,” she said. “You absolutely cannot expose away the crisis.”

In both the U.S. and Ukraine, experts say, there is far more societal awareness now of state-sponsored disinformation. Russia in the past several years has continued to bombard Ukrainians with text messages and false stories during the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine in which at least 14,000 people have died. And Russia’s interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election led to several investigations and years of often fractious debates.

Bret Schafer, senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy, said that while there are risks to elevating false claims in the process of debunking them, “there is a need to head off information threats as opposed to responding to them after they’ve been let out into the wild.”

But publicly accusing Russia of misbehavior is ultimately a limited deterrent. “They don’t care about reputational damage,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 China \$4B on Olympics; longer term goal
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.boston.com/sports/coronavirus/2022/01/27/china-spends-billions-on-olympics-with-longer-term-goal/">https://www.boston.com/sports/coronavirus/2022/01/27/china-spends-billions-on-olympics-with-longer-term-goal/</a>
GIST	<p>GENEVA (AP) — The finance model for the Winter Olympics calls for the host country to spend several billion dollars, the IOC to earn a couple billion, and sports bodies to share around hundreds of millions.</p> <p>Fortunately for China, turning a profit from the 2022 Beijing Games was not a priority even before the coronavirus pandemic wiped out some expected sources of income.</p> <p>Chinese President Xi Jinping set a goal in 2015 to create a new tourism industry in the country.</p>



“It will inspire over 300 million Chinese to participate in winter sports if we win, which will contribute greatly to the development of the international Olympic cause,” Xi said back then, according to China’s official Xinhua news agency.

The buildup to the Olympics, which open on Feb. 4 and close 16 days later, has brought high-speed train lines that will carry athletes to new ski resorts outside Beijing. For the next few decades, those same train lines will be shuttling Chinese tourists to the mountains.

### **China spending**

Russia reportedly spent \$51 billion on the 2014 Sochi Games, a price tag that is expected to stand as an Olympic record for many years. That huge amount made European voters nervous about hosting in the future and led the IOC to review [how Games are awarded and organized](#).

But China’s motivation, like Russia in 2014, is a state-backed plan to create domestic leisure and tourism sectors with the big-ticket item again being a city-to-mountains transport system.

[China allocated more than \\$9 billion](#) for a high-speed rail linking Beijing to nearby ski resorts in Zhangjiakou and Yangqing, where ski slopes have been carved out of mountains that get little natural snow.

The budget for Olympic-specific operations to host the Games is expected to be about \$4 billion. Venues built in Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympics have been repurposed. The Water Cube for swimming is now the Ice Cube for curling.

Still, the overall investment on winter sports has been significant since Beijing won its Olympic bid seven years ago.

China now has more than 650 ice rinks and 800 ski resorts, [China Daily reported](#) this month, citing the National Winter Sports Administrative Center. Those numbers mark rises of 317% and 41%, respectively, since 2015.

### **China income**

China would have expected modest revenue from relatively few international visitors for the Winter Games even before the pandemic made their trips impossible.

Tickets also aren’t being sold to residents of China, taking another of the host’s income streams. The IOC’s own figures show the highest Winter Games ticketing revenue was \$250 million at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, which sold 1.5 million tickets.

Host city organizing committees keep income from domestic sponsor deals they negotiate. Sochi set the Winter Games record with almost \$1.2 billion from 46 sponsors.

[The Beijing organizing committee’s](#) website currently lists 44 commercial partners, nearly all Chinese, in four tiers that include suppliers of goods and services. The 11 top-tier “partners” include Air China and Bank of China.

Sales of merchandizing such as gloves and mascots, worth \$79 million to Pyeongchang in 2018, also top up local organizers’ income.

Still, the most important number has at least officially already been reached. The National Bureau of Statistics said this month the target of engaging 300 million people in winter sports had been hit.

### **IOC income**

The IOC gets billions of dollars from broadcasters around the world and from sponsors who get exclusive global rights.

Beijing is the first of [American broadcaster NBC's \\$7.75 billion](#), six-Olympics deal through 2032. It was said when signed eight years ago to be worth a combined \$2.5 billion for the 2022 Beijing Games and the 2024 Paris Olympics.

The Summer Olympics bring in about twice as much as the Winter Games.

The IOC now has 13 top-tier sponsors, including Chinese companies Alibaba and Mengniu, which is in the soft drinks category along with Coca-Cola. It was 11 for Sochi and Rio de Janeiro when their combined value was \$1 billion in cash and services in 2014 and 2016.

The so-called TOP program is set to be worth about \$3 billion for 2021-24, IOC president Thomas Bach told members last March. It was unclear if that reflected Tokyo being pushed back as host into 2021.

### **IOC spending**

The IOC is giving \$880 million toward Beijing organizers' costs. That's only a few million less than Pyeongchang organizers got four years ago.

The IOC also shared \$215 million from its 2018 Olympic revenue among the seven governing bodies of Winter Games sports — skiing, skating, hockey, biathlon, bobsled, curling and luge.

In their 2020 accounts, the International Ski Federation listed \$13 million as its Olympic payment and the International Skating Union noted more than \$11 million.

Another \$215 million was distributed among national Olympic committees. Of the 206 NOCs, 92 competed in Pyeongchang.

### **Athletes' share**

The 2,900 athletes at the Beijing Olympics do not get prize money from the IOC for competing or winning medals. Some of what the IOC pays sports bodies can trickle down to athletes, however.

The IOC will put \$590 million into the [Olympic Solidarity](#) fund for the 2021-24 period. That will give grants to train athletes, coaches and administrators. Less wealthy countries are prioritized.

The IOC said 420 athletes from 78 teams were awarded scholarships to help qualify and prepare for this year's Olympics. The program had a \$10 million budget for the 2018 edition.

In some countries, Olympic medalists get cash or gifts from sports bodies and governments.

The U.S. Olympic team's ["Operation Gold"](#) program has paid \$37,500 for a gold medal, \$22,500 for silver and \$15,000 for bronze.

[Russia has a tradition](#) of wealthy supporters rewarding Olympic success. Gold medalists at the Sochi Olympics were given \$120,000 and an SUV.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 BLM's \$millions go unaccounted for
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/blms-millions-go-unaccounted-for-after-leaders-quietly-jump-ship">https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/blms-millions-go-unaccounted-for-after-leaders-quietly-jump-ship</a>
GIST	<p>No one appears to have been in charge at <a href="#">Black Lives Matter</a> for months. The <a href="#">address</a> it lists on <a href="#">tax</a> forms is wrong, and the <a href="#">charity's</a> two board members won't say who controls its \$60 million bankroll, a <i>Washington Examiner</i> investigation has found.</p> <p>BLM's shocking lack of transparency surrounding its finances and operations raises major <a href="#">legal</a> and <a href="#">ethical</a> red flags, multiple charity experts told the <i>Washington Examiner</i>.</p>

"Like a giant ghost ship full of treasure drifting in the night with no captain, no discernible crew, and no clear direction," CharityWatch Executive Director Laurie Styron said of BLM.

BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors appointed two activists to serve as the group's senior directors following her resignation in May amid scrutiny over her personal finances. But both quietly announced in September that they never took the jobs due to disagreements with BLM. They told the *Washington Examiner* they don't know who now leads the nation's most influential social justice organization.

Paul Kamenar, counsel for conservative watchdog group the National Legal and Policy Center, said a full audit and investigation into [Black Lives Matter](#) Global Network Foundation, the legal entity that represents the national BLM movement, is warranted.

"This is grossly irregular and improper for a nonprofit with \$60 million in its coffers," Kamenar said.

BLM previously came under fire from local black activists after the *New York Post* reported in April that Cullors, then its executive director, had spent \$3.2 million on real estate across the United States. The reports followed BLM's [disclosure](#) in February 2021 that it closed out 2020 with \$60 million in its bank accounts.

BLM [denied](#) allegations that Cullors spent BLM funds on her personal properties. However, BLM and other activist organizations under Cullors's control offered contracts to an art company led by the father of her only child, the *Daily Caller* reported.

Cullors [announced](#) in May she was stepping down and that activists Makani Themba and Monifa Bandle would lead the organization as senior executives. But Themba and Bandle [revealed](#) in September that they never actually took the job because of disagreements with BLM's "acting Leadership Council."

Both Themba and Bandle told the *Washington Examiner* they do not know who took over as BLM's top executive after their departure. And neither would say who served on the council.

"We never actually started in the position, so we never received any detailed information," Themba said. While a charity's finances are ultimately the responsibility of its board of directors, BLM's [bylaws](#) explicitly state that its executive director "shall have charge of all funds and securities of the Corporation."

The two remaining [BLM board members](#), Shalomyah Bowers and Raymond Howard, did not return numerous requests for comment asking who has been in charge of BLM and its money since Cullors left the charity in May.

Bowers served as the treasurer for multiple activist organizations run by Cullors, including [BLM PAC](#) and a Los Angeles-based jail reform group that paid Cullors [\\$20,000 a month](#) and dropped nearly \$26,000 for "meetings" at a luxury [Malibu](#) beach resort in 2019.

Bowers declined to comment when reached by phone on Monday.

Howard has spoken [openly](#) on [Facebook](#) about his work with BLM and his close [relationship](#) with Cullors, but he appears to have recently taken steps to conceal his role with the charity.

As recently as last Friday, Howard's [LinkedIn](#) profile stated that he is the director of operations for "An International Social Justice Organization." His [page](#) was modified after the *Washington Examiner* contacted Howard for comment and now states he serves as the director of operations for a "Non Profit." A reference to Howard's position as the finance and operations manager of New Impact Partners, a Dayton, Ohio-based consulting firm [owned](#) by his [sister](#), was also removed from his LinkedIn profile.

Also as recently as last Friday, a [website](#) for New Impact Partners attributed a quote to "Raymond" from "Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation," thanking the consulting firm for its help solving BLM's organizational challenges. The attribution was [removed](#) from the website after the *Washington Examiner* asked Howard how much BLM has paid his sister's firm.

Despite New Impact Partners's apparent efforts to conceal its affiliation with BLM, the consulting firm continues to [solicit applications](#) for its "Talent Network," which it says will connect job applicants directly to BLM and other activist organizations.

Longtime charity expert Doug White said it's a red flag that BLM won't answer basic questions about its finances or leadership structure.

"Sixty million dollars is not chump change," White said. "What BLM does is of tremendous social importance. That they won't give an honest or complete or straightforward answer in regards to its leadership is a concern. Not only do they not have an executive director right now, we think, but they also don't want to tell you how the organization is being run."

BLM was not a charity in its own right for much of 2020, a year in which it received a windfall of cash from big corporations and individual donors spurred by the police killing of George Floyd and the nationwide riots that followed. Rather, BLM spent most of the year essentially borrowing the charitable status of two other California-based charities, [Thousand Currents](#) and the [Tides Foundation](#), which served as BLM's fiscal sponsors.

But the IRS [granted](#) BLM tax-exempt status in December 2020, enabling the group to operate as a charity independent of its former fiscal sponsors. And Thousand Currents reported in its most recent [audited financial statements](#) that it transferred \$66.5 million directly into BLM's coffers in October 2020.

Cullors [signed](#) the asset transfer on behalf of BLM on Sept. 16, 2020, according to a copy of the agreement provided to the *Washington Examiner* by the California Office of the Attorney General. BLM published a [report](#) last February saying it incurred \$8.4 million in operating expenses in 2020 and that it closed out the year with \$60 million under its control.

But BLM [reported](#) to the IRS in August 2020 that it expected to incur precisely \$12,706,366 in "Professional Fees" expenditures during the same calendar year, a figure \$4.3 million higher than the top-line annual spending figure it later reported to the public in February.

Kamenar said his watchdog group believes there should be a "full audit" of BLM to clear up the spending discrepancy.

"Bottom line: Lot of questionable financial activity, organizational structure, location of the books, etc. that call for a full investigation," Kamenar said.

Data that should be contained within BLM's Form 990 tax return for 2020, which was [due](#) to the IRS in November, would help clear up the organization's \$4.3 million spending discrepancy.

On Tuesday, a *Washington Examiner* reporter attempted to request BLM's 2020 Form 990 in person at the charity's [office](#) in Los Angeles, which the group [disclosed](#) as the location its books are stored in previous filings submitted to the IRS, only to be told by a security guard that there has never been a BLM office at the location.

An unidentified BLM spokesperson informed the *Washington Examiner* on Thursday that the group does not currently maintain a "permanent office" and offered to mail a copy of its 990 within two weeks.

Alan Dye, a partner at Webster, Chamberlain & Bean who specializes in nonprofit law, told the *Washington Examiner* that charities that don't submit their Form 990s on time could face fines from the IRS and some state-level charity oversight agencies.

	<p>Styron, the CharityWatch executive director, said Form 990s are matters of public record and that BLM should have completed its 2020 form by now.</p> <p>"Irrespective of where any person falls on the political spectrum or what their position is on any social justice issue, hopefully, we can all agree that tax-subsidized public charities have an ethical responsibility to be transparent with the public about how they are operating and how the donations they receive are being used," Styron said. "The amount of money involved here is not insignificant."</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 New discord between Ukraine, US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/28/politics/president-joe-biden-zelensky-putin-russia-ukraine/index.html">https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/28/politics/president-joe-biden-zelensky-putin-russia-ukraine/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN)New signs of <a href="#">a fracture between the US and Ukraine</a> over the imminence of a possible Russian invasion could seriously undermine President Joe Biden's muscular front against Vladimir Putin in their escalating standoff.</p> <p>Frustration in Kyiv has mounted in recent days over escalating US rhetoric on the crisis, even as Moscow pours more troops into positions near the Ukrainian border. Washington and its allies have been waging an unusually open and vocal public relations warfare campaign -- an approach that primarily appears rooted in genuine fears of a major conflagration in Ukraine.</p> <p>But there are clear signs that the strategy is also designed to pile pressure on Putin and to sharpen his strategic dilemma while compelling US allies in Europe into taking tougher stands. It may offer political cover to Biden by showing that he was not caught off guard if Russia does invade. The strategy also shields a President, who is wobbling at home, from attacks by Republican hawks keen to portray him as a weak appeaser ahead of midterm elections.</p> <p>Yet it also threatens to cause a clash between the wider interests of Biden and those of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is trying to maintain calm at home even as he tries to enlist international arms and support for his country's defense.</p> <p><b>A telephone call that 'did not go well'</b></p> <p>A call between Zelensky and Biden on Thursday should have been used to get on the same page. But the Ukrainians made it known ahead of time they would ask the US President to tone down his rhetoric. After the leaders spoke, a senior Ukrainian official told CNN's Matthew Chance in Kyiv that the call "did not go well" and that Zelensky had asked his US counterpart to "calm down the messaging" while arguing the Russian threat was still ambiguous.</p> <p>According to the Ukrainian official, Biden warned an invasion was now virtually certain once the ground freezes in February, making it more passable for military vehicles. National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne disputed the account of the call and said "anonymous sources are 'leaking' falsehoods." She noted that Biden had warned that a February invasion was a possibility, a position she said he had adopted for months.</p> <p>Zelensky's spokesman also disputed the Ukrainian official's characterization of the call. The Ukrainian President himself tweeted that he and Biden had a long call and "discussed recent diplomatic efforts on de-escalation and agreed on joint actions for the future."</p> <p>Whatever the specifics of the private conversation, it is no secret that the US and Ukraine have been publicly at odds over the scale of the threat. The government in Kyiv was, for instance, taken by surprise earlier this week when the State Department said it would <a href="#">reduce staff levels at the US embassy</a>, beginning with the departure of nonessential staff and families of diplomats.</p> <p>The disconnect is notable between two friendly governments and reflects the extreme high stakes of the moment. It's also an odd public drama since a nation under apparently imminent threat of an invasion has a</p>



lower assessment of its own vulnerability than the United States, which has marshaled an international effort in its defense. Most damagingly, signs of a public disagreement between Biden and Zelensky would play directly into Russian hands. Moscow has already highlighted Ukraine's more temperate position to argue that Washington is exploiting the country to escalate against Russia. In fact, the opposite is the case, with Putin [holding Ukraine hostage in a bid to wring concessions](#) from Biden that would change post-Cold War Europe.

Suggestions that the US and Ukraine are on a different page on the likelihood of a Russian attack might also cause political problems for Biden back home -- from critics on the radical wings of both political parties who have criticized his hawkish approach. After all, why should the United States be more worried about the security of a country in Russia's backyard than its own leader is?

### **Information warfare**

As Russia has built up its massive force around Ukraine, the United States has responded by deploying information warfare against a proven master of the genre -- Putin. Biden and his aides have not pleaded with the Russian leader not to invade. They have instead said repeatedly that they think he will do so and used the word "imminent."

The Pentagon said Thursday that Russia had poured more troops in to the [region in the previous 24 hours](#). Last week, Britain released intelligence that it said showed Putin was trying to replace the Kyiv government with a puppet regime, bolstering US warnings that Ukraine is in immediate danger. In another development on Thursday, the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank released open source [satellite imagery and analysis](#) on the Russian build-up. This kind of information offensive from Washington is not the typical approach to a standoff with a foreign power. So it's raised questions about the administration's intentions.

The first explanation is that the US actually believes what it is saying -- that Russian tanks could soon start rolling in one of the most serious threats to an independent nation in greater Europe since World War II. While direct clashes between US and Russian forces are unlikely, there would be global implications from such a conflict. The principle would be established that powerful autocracies could swallow smaller democracies. Reverberations between the US and Russia, possibly including cyber exchanges, could follow. All of that would explain why the administration is working so hard to put the world on notice.

Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire co-led a bipartisan delegation to Kyiv last week. She [told CNN](#) on Thursday: "I believe the threat is very real and could happen at any time based on the information that I've seen."

### **Pressure on Putin**

Washington may also be driven by a desire to deprive the Russian leader of any element of surprise for his mobilization. If Moscow does invade, or bites off another chunk of Ukrainian territory to add to its 2014 annexation of Crimea, the administration's urgency will have been vindicated. If Putin eventually backs down, Biden can argue that his strong stand worked, and the Russian leader may look diminished in the eyes of the world. But the strategy also risks putting the Russian leader into a corner and could force him to act to save his strongman image.

While praising Biden for refusing to accept Russian concessions, Thomas DiNanno, a former senior State Department arms control official in the Trump administration, said it might be wise to cool the language. "I would encourage the administration to return to the notion of strategic ambiguity, you know, don't tip your hand. And I think maybe they've done that a little bit too aggressively," DiNanno, now with the Hudson Institute, said on CNN "Newsroom" on Thursday.

One reason why Biden and Zelensky's messages are clashing is that they are addressing different audiences. Biden is speaking to Russia, Europe and the American people. Zelensky is trying to guard against panic at home. He responded to previous warnings by the US that an invasion could be imminent by telling his people to take a deep breath and to stay calm. Yet his aides may have seriously erred in their

readout of the Biden call. The US President has stuck his neck out to support Ukraine. Embarrassing him is no kind of payback and Zelensky risks his own stature in Washington.

More importantly, Russia will take advantage of such splits.

"I am a little bit worried that disclosing a lot of this in the public is not going to help anything, it will help just Mr. Putin," John Tefft, a former US ambassador to Moscow, said on CNN's "Erin Burnett OutFront" on Thursday.

### **Upping the heat on Europe**

Robust American rhetoric on the crisis also appears to have another purpose -- convincing America's less hawkish European allies that their own security is at risk.

To begin with, the US approach only exposed transatlantic differences. Biden was criticized last week by Republicans for suggesting that allies might not back a full implementation of sanctions in the event of a "minor incursion" by Russia into Ukraine. But he was telling the truth. In another sign of discord, French President Emmanuel Macron called for a European Union channel to Moscow. The head of Germany's Navy [had to resign](#) after remarks sympathetic to Putin.

But Biden's strong line now appears to be working. EU Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#) told CNN's Christiane Amanpour Thursday that "nothing was off the table" including killing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project designed to bring Russian gas to Europe and the removal of Russia from the SWIFT financial transfers system. And Germany's new foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, said Berlin was working on strong sanctions should Russia invade Ukraine -- including on Nord Stream, a shift in a previous German position. Biden announced on Thursday that new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will visit him at the White House next month in a further sign of a converging position.

Still, the US diplomatic effort also reflects Putin's underlying advantage. He knows his own mind and few others do. The question will soon start to be asked how long the United States can continue to warn that an invasion that doesn't come is "imminent." Prolonging the alert might eventually open up new divides between the US and Ukraine and Washington and its European allies.

And Putin may spot an opening.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 EPA tackles environmental injustices</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/epa-environmental-justice-vulnerable-communities/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/epa-environmental-justice-vulnerable-communities/</a>
GIST	<p>The Environmental Protection Agency is vowing to address environmental justice concerns throughout marginalized communities with a series of actions announced Wednesday. Some vulnerable populations in the South could begin to see changes "immediately," according to EPA Administrator Michael Regan.</p> <p>"These communities deserve to know what's in the air they're breathing and what's in the water that they're drinking," Regan told CBS News' Major Garrett Thursday. "And they deserve to know in real time."</p> <p>The EPA will hold polluting facilities accountable through mobilizing resources to invest in air monitoring and conducting unannounced inspections of facilities. The EPA also outlined community-specific actions to be taken to address community concerns.</p> <p>The agency's <a href="#">policy actions</a> come following a <a href="#">tour</a> through towns in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas to learn about and protect communities from pollution. Regan said the agency focused on marginalized communities within the three southern states because of the persistent environmental justice concerns they have historically faced. According to the <a href="#">EPA</a>, low-income and minority communities are "more likely to be impacted by environmental hazards and more likely to live near contaminated lands."</p>

	<p>"These people have been ignored for decades, and we really wanted to put faces on these issues that we have heard so much about," the administrator said.</p> <p>He admitted that agencies across all levels "have to do better," but noted Thursday that the Biden administration has made environmental justice a "centerpiece" to its work.</p> <p>The latest actions from the EPA will also make \$20 million grants from the American Rescue Plan available for improving air quality in vulnerable communities, the EPA said. The agency also unveiled a project Wednesday along with the actions called the Pollution Accountability Team, which has goals to provide strict environmental compliance and monitoring throughout the South.</p> <p>Regan said some communities throughout the three states have already begun to see improvements from the plan. Like in Louisiana, where the agency has issued notices of violation to industries after recent inspections identified air monitoring violations.</p> <p>"We started our action immediately and we have heard from the community that they are very appreciative that they did not have to wait too long to see us put our money where our mouths are," he said.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Apple AirTags used to stalk people</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/apple-airtags-stalk-strangers/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/apple-airtags-stalk-strangers/</a>
GIST	<p>Apple's AirTags, small bluetooth devices that owners attach to their key chains or keep in their bags and purses to locate their personal belongings, are being misused by stalkers who are tracking their targets' every move.</p> <p>The devices, which cost \$29 each, are simple to use: Users pair them with their phones, and the tags indicate where an item is located in real-time. But in an alarming new trend, they are also enabling stalkers, as individuals are discovering the wireless tags — that don't belong to them — on their person or attached to or hidden in their belongings.</p> <p>Two different victims of AirTag stalking told Inside Edition's Lisa Guerrero they discovered they were being tracked by someone they didn't know.</p> <p>One Atlanta woman discovered an AirTag had been placed in her car's gas tank, after she received an alert on her iPhone that an "Unknown Accessory" had been following her.</p> <p>"I randomly got a notification to my phone saying something about how there is an AirTag that doesn't belong to me that's been with me," the victim told Guerrero.</p> <p><b>Stalking victim feels "helpless"</b></p> <p>Another Atlanta-based target of AirTag stalking said she was scared "to death" to discover she was being tracked by a stranger who had placed an AirTag somewhere in her car. "I mean, I really feel helpless," she told Guerrero.</p> <p>She brought the issue to the police, but in Georgia, individuals can legally place trackers on others' vehicles, so long as the device isn't used to stalk or harass them.</p> <p>For its part, Apple said the AirTags have built-in security features that automatically activate when the devices are potentially being used nefariously, and that the company is committed to ensuring the tool is safe and <a href="#">secure</a>.</p> <p>iPhone users (with an iPhone 6 or newer, running Apple's iOS 14.5 software or <a href="#">above</a>), receive "unknown device" alerts when an accessory that doesn't belong to them appears to be following them.</p>

"AirTag is designed with a set of proactive features to discourage unwanted tracking," Apple said in a statement to Inside Edition. "If users ever feel their safety is at risk, they are encouraged to contact local law enforcement who can work with Apple to provide any available information about the unknown AirTag."

Android users receive no such alerts unless they download a Tracker Detect app which Apple released in December. The app gives Android users the ability to make an AirTag that's tracking them chime, so they can better locate and remove it from their person.

Unlike the iPhone tracking feature, the Android Tracker Detect app will not periodically scan for unknown devices [automatically](#). Instead, users must use the app to manually scan for AirTags.

### **Don't go home with an unknown device**

But victims of AirTag stalking suggest they are still vulnerable when bad actors target them. The second victim has not yet been able to locate the device that has been surreptitiously placed in or attached to her car, despite having the vehicle inspected by trained technicians.

"My feeling is if they've done it to me I'm probably not the only one," she said. "You can do everything in your power to protect yourself but the fact that someone with bad intentions can track you — and there's nothing you can do about it — is really scary and really frustrating."

Inside Edition anchor Deborah Norville said when people receive AirTag security notifications from Apple, they should not go to their homes, offices, or anyplace where they regularly spend time.

"The best thing to do is go to the police station," Norville said. "Say, 'I'm being tracked. There is an indication on my phone that there is an AirTag somewhere in my person or on my car. Can you help me?'"

Sometimes, all a victim can do is wait for the device's battery to die for it stop doing its job. Unfortunately, AirTag batteries last about a year.

### **"Terrifyingly good" at tracking things — and following people**

Experts have been aware of the tags' vulnerabilities since their release in April 2021. Washington Post tech columnist Geoffrey Fowler, who tested the tags, [described them as being "terrifyingly good"](#) at tracking things and also possibly helping stalkers.

Fowler said a colleague slipped an AirTag into Fowler's bag with his permission and tracked him for one week.

"When I was riding my bike around town, it could update him on my whereabouts every couple of minutes," Fowler told CBS News Streaming.

"So it's a double-edged sword with this kind of technology, and I think we need to talk more about it," he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/28 New mutant omicron most contagious yet?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.thedailybeast.com/ba2-omicron-could-just-be-the-most-contagious-covid-yet?ref=home">https://www.thedailybeast.com/ba2-omicron-could-just-be-the-most-contagious-covid-yet?ref=home</a>
GIST	<p>Just a couple weeks ago it seemed like the worst was behind us and the wave of COVID-19 infections driven by the <a href="#">new Omicron variant</a> was beginning to ebb in many of the worst-hit places.</p> <p>But epidemiologists warned that <a href="#">some new variant</a> would eventually replace Omicron, <a href="#">potentially driving a new surge in cases</a>. They were right.</p> <p>This week, cases started rising again in several countries. And some experts think an elusive form of Omicron, the so-called BA.2 sublineage, might be responsible.</p>

If that's the case and BA.2 proves even more transmissible than baseline Omicron—the BA.1 sublineage—then we should brace for a difficult spring. BA.2 is already making inroads in the U.S. It could slow or even reverse our recovery from the first Omicron wave.

Don't panic quite yet. But don't let down your guard. And if you're unvaccinated or unboosted, you know the drill. Yesterday was the best time to get your jab.

Scientists have known about BA.2 for weeks now. They first detected it in early December in samples from South Africa, Australia, and Canada. That was just a few weeks after officials from South Africa announced the first BA.1 cases.

BA.1—again, that's the baseline Omicron, which has dozens of unique mutations compared to earlier SARS-CoV-2 lineages—quickly became dominant all over the world, all but wiping out the previously dominant Delta lineage in many countries.

Omicron reshaped the pandemic. It's the most transmissible lineage yet—although it often results in less severe infections than Delta, owing in part to its tendency to stay in the throat rather than attack the lungs.

Omicron set records for daily new infections, but in countries where a majority of the population is vaccinated, death rates were lower than case rates—a so-called [“decoupling”](#) of infections and deaths that represents the silver lining in Omicron's storm clouds.

While BA.1 did its dirty work, BA.2 lurked in the background. It's worth noting that BA.2 can be hard to distinguish from BA.1 in many polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests. Distinguishing the two sublineages sometimes requires genetic sequencing in a lab, which can slow down efforts to separately track the two.

In any event, now that BA.1 is fading in many countries, BA.2 seems to be taking over. “Recent trends from India, South Africa, the United Kingdom and Denmark suggest that BA.2 is increasing in proportion,” the World Health Organization [announced](#) on Friday.

“The BA.2 sublineage has been seen here in Washington,” Keith Jerome, a University of Washington virologist, told The Daily Beast, “and experience from other parts of the world suggest that it may be even more infectious than BA.1, and seems to be outcompeting it.”

That might be because BA.2 is actually quite distinct from BA.1 on a genetic level—and those differences might make BA.2 more transmissible.

Both sublineages have around 50 unique mutations compared to, say, Delta. But they don't have the same 50 unique mutations. In fact, no fewer than 16 of BA.2's mutations [are unique](#) to the sublineage. Those changes mostly affect the virus's spike protein, which helps it to grab onto and infect our cells. A mutated spike protein is associated with higher transmissibility. In other words, BA.2 might find transmission pathways where BA.1 can't.

Consider what's happening in Denmark. Daily new cases [peaked](#) at 47,000 on Jan. 21 then dropped to 36,000 the next day—a steep decline that's consistent with BA.1's fast spread and equally fast burnout. But at the same time BA.1 was running out of infection pathways, BA.2 was finding new ones. By the second week of January, BA.2 [accounted for half of daily cases](#)—up from just a fifth of cases two weeks earlier.

Unsurprisingly, BA.2 drove daily new infections in Denmark back up to 47,000 on Tuesday. The following day, Health Minister Magnus Heunicke [declared that the rapid spread means “it must be more contagious,” than BA.1.](#)



Meanwhile, roughly the same thing was happening in the U.K. Daily new cases peaked at 219,000 on Jan. 4 then declined to 70,000 two weeks later as BA.1 lost steam.

Then BA.2 began to take over. The proportion of new infections that U.K. scientists attribute to BA.2 [has doubled every four days](#) since the first week of January, putting the sublineage on track to be the dominant form of SARS-CoV-2 in the U.K. next month.

Unsurprisingly, U.K. case rates bent back upward, from 70,000 a day to a steady 100,000 or so for a week straight. On Friday, the government [labeled](#) BA.2 a “a variant under investigation” but urged calm. “Further analysis is needed.”

The Danish and British experiences aren’t isolated. Greece has also seen cases increase as BA.2 becomes dominant. And experts warn the same thing could happen in the U.S. Rob Knight, the head of a genetic-computation lab at the University of California, San Diego, has been detecting BA.2 in test samples. He said a second Omicron surge is “plausible.” “I am waiting for more info to draw conclusions myself.”

Edwin Michael, an epidemiologist at the Center for Global Health Infectious Disease Research at the University of South Florida, is more pessimistic. “We could see resurgences in cases,” he told The Daily Beast.

If there’s good news in this exhausting, seemingly unending pandemic, it’s that BA.2 might be more transmissible than BA.1 and every other SARS-CoV-2 lineage, but it doesn’t appear to reduce the effectiveness of the vaccines. At least, no more than BA.1 does.

So even as cases bend upward again, severe cases—those resulting in hospitalization or death—might not. “The flare-ups might not constitute a problem for hospitals,” Michael said.

But BA.2 is yet another reminder. As long as there are billions of people who are too young to get vaccinated, don’t have access to the jabs, or reject the vaccines for ideological reasons, it will be impossible to eliminate SARS-CoV-2.

The virus is here to stay. And every new infection is an opportunity for the pathogen. “Viruses mutate,” Niema Moshiri, a geneticist at the University of California, San Diego, told The Daily Beast. “It’s simply what they do.”

Every mutation could produce a new lineage or sublineage. We’re lucky that the latest mutations gave us BA.1 and BA.2—sublineages that are highly transmissible but often result in mild disease.

Our good luck might not hold. Whatever comes after BA.2 could be less transmissible and even milder. Or it could spread even faster and kill more often. Add in the fact that no immunity—whether natural or vaccine-induced—lasts forever, and the future gets cloudier.

“Given non-permanent immunity and with variants that will continue to emerge, we might need to consider a multi-pronged approach to tackle the repeat flare-ups that will inevitably occur,” Michael said.

It’s not for no reason that doctors are begging for [COVID pills](#) people can take at home to treat mild infections. And that vaccine-developers are working so hard on new [“pan-COVID” vaccines](#) that could be more broadly effective and more durable than the jabs we have now.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Military unable to investigate civilian deaths
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-unable-to-properly-investigate-civilian-deaths-report-finds-11643310638?mod=hp_listb_pos4">https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-unable-to-properly-investigate-civilian-deaths-report-finds-11643310638?mod=hp_listb_pos4</a>
GIST	U.S. military personnel often lack the training and resources to properly investigate civilian casualties and take steps to prevent future unintended deaths, a congressionally mandated study of the Pentagon said.

The Defense Department “is not adequately organized, trained or equipped to fulfill its current responsibilities for addressing civilian harm,” the report prepared by the Rand Corp. said.

The U.S. military has long struggled to contain civilian casualties, due in part to its reliance in conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria on airstrikes undertaken with limited guidance from the ground. In August, a [U.S. drone strike intended to stop a suspected terrorist attack](#) on troops at the Kabul airport killed 10 civilians, including seven children. The Pentagon also has acknowledged dozens of civilian casualties in a strike during a decisive [2019 battle against Islamic State militants](#) in Syria.

The 110-page report was ordered by the 2020 law authorizing Pentagon spending, and was submitted to the Pentagon in February 2021.

The report’s authors said they interviewed more than 80 people and reviewed hundreds of documents. They warned that future conflicts could create new challenges to the U.S. effort to prevent civilian deaths, including fights against formidable militaries in large urban areas.

“The Pentagon is not ready for conflicts with potential adversaries like Russia and China,” said Michael McNerney, a senior Rand Corp. researcher who was one of the report’s principal authors.

The Pentagon on Thursday committed itself to implementing at least some of the changes recommended in the report, including standardizing the reporting of civilian deaths and a review of policies and procedures to avoid them.

A U.S. defense official who briefed journalists on the report Thursday declined to outline the specific changes.

“This is a big department,” said the defense official. “We are trying to get it right.”

The U.S. has struggled to reduce civilian casualties since the early days of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq, which began in 2003, and Afghans and Iraqis have said the killing of innocents fueled insurgent movements and terrorist groups such as al Qaeda.

The strategy the U.S. used after 2014 to fight Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has also posed obstacles to investigating and preventing civilian deaths, the report said. In that conflict, the U.S. relied heavily on Syrian and Iraqi partners to do the fighting on the ground, while the U.S. provided air and artillery support. As a result, the U.S. had too few people on the ground to regularly send to the scene to investigate reports of civilian deaths, the Rand report noted.

The report documented many deficiencies at U.S. military commands and at the Pentagon. The task force that combated Islamic State had three people assigned to investigate reports of civilian casualties. When the U.S. suspected Iraqi forces had killed civilians in the campaign against ISIS, the Pentagon didn’t follow up with its own investigation, a deficiency the report described as an “accountability gap.” Nor did the U.S. military work with the Iraqis to help them develop their system for tracking civilian casualties.

Defense Department officials and uniformed officers assigned to deal with civilian casualty issues are often junior and ill-trained for the task, the report found. U.S. military commands don’t have sufficient full-time teams that focus exclusively on minimizing civilian casualties, the report said.

“Civilian casualty issues are important for everybody, but they are not the top priority for anybody,” Mr. McNerney said. “Everything feels serious about it in theory but it is nobody’s full-time job.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 More 5G, fog cancelations Paine Field
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3327200/5g-fog-cancellations-paine-field/">https://mynorthwest.com/3327200/5g-fog-cancellations-paine-field/</a>

GIST	<p>More Alaska Airlines flights out of Paine Field were cancelled Thursday, citing issues created by the combination of 5G signals and fog.</p> <p>Initially, the Federal Aviation Administration and a number major airlines were worried that there could be interference from the new 5G system that could mess with the altimeters, asking that the full rollout of these new frequencies be delayed until more testing can be done.</p> <p>Last week, the FAA <a href="#">approved a handful of commercial airplane models</a> to land in low-visibility situations in areas where 5G signals are present. That includes Alaska Airlines' Boeing and Airbus aircraft. The regional jets used by Horizon Air — which is owned by Alaska and operates out of Paine Field — have not yet been cleared at certain airports, and are still under restrictions during low visibility conditions such as dense fog.</p> <p>As of early Thursday morning, four flights have been cancelled amid ongoing foggy weather conditions. The airline canceled <a href="#">all of its flights</a> out of the airport on Tuesday, with more cancellations occurring the following day as well.</p> <p>There were also early concerns for larger airports like Sea-Tac, which were assuaged when the FAA cleared most of Boeing and Airbus' primary passenger planes last week.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Pentagon defends preparation for Ukraine</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/01/27/pentagon-defends-its-preparation-ukraine-crisis-details-military-forces-that-could-deploy/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/01/27/pentagon-defends-its-preparation-ukraine-crisis-details-military-forces-that-could-deploy/</a>
GIST	<p>The Pentagon is defending its preparations in response to the threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a top spokesman on Thursday highlighting that the United States has provided millions of dollars in weapons to Kyiv and providing new details about U.S. military forces that could deploy to Eastern Europe to bolster security there.</p> <p>Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the United States has been monitoring Russian President Vladimir Putin's military buildup along the Ukrainian border for months. More than 100,000 Russian troops are amassed, including some in neighboring Belarus.</p> <p>"I take issue with the idea that this is sort of 11th-hour, Hail Mary-pass-throwing stuff," Kirby said. "We've been talking about this now for a couple of months, what we've been seeing on the ground."</p> <p>The comments came as the U.S. military prepared to potentially send thousands of troops from the United States to Europe. Kirby identified for the first time that elements of the 82nd Airborne Division and XVIII Airborne Corps from Fort Bragg, N.C., the 101st Airborne Division from Fort Campbell, Ky., and the 4th Infantry Division from Fort Carson, Colo., were among an initial force of 8,500 troops that were put on high alert this week and could be among the first to go.</p> <p>Other units also have been put on a heightened alert status, Kirby said. He declined to name them but said they are located at bases that include Fort Hood, Tex.; Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state; Fort Polk, La.; and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. Troops from those units could provide medical, aviation and logistics support in addition to combat power, he said.</p> <p>Underscoring the situation's sensitivities, Kirby declined to say which units from those bases could deploy. But they could significantly enhance NATO's capabilities. Davis-Monthan, for instance, is home to five Air Force squadrons of A-10 tank-killing attack jets. A defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity, said that the Pentagon has become increasingly careful about the information it releases concerning U.S. forces in Europe, as the administration seeks to emphasize that diplomacy is still an option in the crisis.</p>

The Pentagon's deliberations over how to respond to the crisis come as it balances how to show resolve, work with European allies, avoid a potential quagmire and keep focus on security concerns posed elsewhere by China, according to current and former U.S. officials. President Biden has ruled out any U.S. troops fighting in Ukraine, but an array of other options are on the table.

Robert Brown, a retired Army general with experience in Europe, said he has not heard "anybody in their right mind who thinks we would go [into] Ukraine." But there is a desire, he said, to look for ways to strengthen the military alliance in Europe in light of Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent decisions and unpredictability.

"Folks were nervous before this about Russia's aggressive actions," Brown said. "Now once they cross that border into Ukraine, who's to say they won't keep going? I wouldn't put it past Putin in a heartbeat."

Russia's current buildup follows its 2014 seizure of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed through force and continues to control, and a 2008 invasion of the Republic of Georgia. Biden has promised allies that the United States considers its obligations to fellow NATO countries "sacred." Under the terms of their treaty, which was signed by original members in the wake of World War II, an attack on one member must be considered an attack on all of them.

But that doesn't mean that United States needs to shoulder most of the load, Republicans and Democrats agree.

"It's on us to go to the allies and say: You're going to have step up and do more this time, no kidding," said Jim Townsend, a senior Pentagon official during the Obama administration.

NATO has a response force that includes up to 40,000 troops from member nations, including the United States. If all NATO members agree to deploy the force, Townsend said, it would be a "big deal" for the alliance, which could shore up defenses in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Once a part of the Soviet Union, they joined NATO in 2004.

"It would be a real signal that the allies themselves have cranked up the pressure on the military side," Townsend said.

Launching such a NATO deployment, however, would require consent from all members, and there is reason to believe securing that could be difficult. Germany, a longtime U.S. ally that obtains natural gas from Russia, is seen as a potential holdout after Berlin declined to send lethal arms to help the Ukrainian military. If Germany does not consent, the United States could deploy troops independently to countries on Europe's eastern flank that ask for additional security, Townsend said.

Kirby, speaking at the Pentagon, said the United States also could reposition some of the more than 60,000 U.S. troops permanently stationed in Europe. About 200 Florida National Guard members also are deployed in Ukraine to advise its military, but they are west of Kyiv, far from the border with Russia. Kirby said the Pentagon believes they could be withdrawn quickly if required.

At sea, the U.S. Navy has several previously scheduled deployments that could be a factor in the Ukraine crisis, a defense official said. They include surveillance flights from an airfield in Sigonella, Italy, by P-8 jets designed to hunt for submarines below the ocean's surface.

The Navy also has joined this month with allies in a sprawling, previously scheduled NATO exercise in the Mediterranean Sea that includes the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman and its accompanying escort ships, collectively carrying nearly 6,000 U.S. troops and dozens of strike aircraft.

The Navy has other vessels in the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas, as well, said Cmdr. Richlyn Ivey, a military spokeswoman. U.S. warships also regularly sail into the Black Sea, which abuts Russia and Ukraine, but no vessels are there at the moment. In December, U.S. European Command said that the destroyer USS Arleigh Burke had departed the Black Sea and was making a port stop in Turkey.

The Marines, though not among the units Kirby identified Thursday, could get involved if requested, a senior Marine Corps official said. The service has Marines preparing for several deployments to the region this year, including a force of hundreds due to arrive in Norway for exercises in March, the official said.

“We would respond to tasking if told to do so,” the official said. “We could definitely do more, but we have to be asked.”

As preparations continue, some have questioned whether the Biden administration is disregarding security concerns posed by China, which the administration has described as its “pacing challenge.”

Elbridge Colby, a senior defense official during the Trump administration, said that he believes the Biden administration should clearly state that it supports NATO and will continue to be a part of it, but warn its allies that the United States must “truly prioritize” getting ready for China.

“People say, ‘Well, of course they need to focus on Europe now,’” Colby said. “Well, no, they don’t. Yes, there are going to be crises. But the fact that there are crises doesn’t change in the slightest the underlying facts, which is that Asia is the most important region, and China our top threat.”

Kirby said that the United States will continue to “walk and chew gum at the same time.”

“There’s a lot on our plate, and we’re focused on all of it,” he said. “Just because right now, one issue obviously is certainly capturing the attention of the world community doesn’t mean that we’re not equally pursuing and focused on other threats and challenges.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 US reaffirms ‘decisive’ backing for Ukraine</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/28/ukraine-russia-us-nato-putin-macron/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/28/ukraine-russia-us-nato-putin-macron/</a>
GIST	<p>Diplomatic talks between the West and Russia over the Ukrainian crisis remained at an impasse this week, but French President Emmanuel Macron will again attempt to make Russia “clarify its position and the aim” of military maneuvers around its eastern neighbor during his Friday morning phone call with President Vladimir Putin.</p> <p>Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops, along with military equipment, near its border with Ukraine, which it attacked in 2014. The buildup has pushed the United States and its NATO allies to send ammunition, antitank missiles and military trainers to Kyiv, as well as to threaten Moscow with some of the most punitive sanctions it has ever faced.</p> <p>The Kremlin is considering written responses by the United States and NATO to its demands — chief among them that the alliance curtail further expansion and activities in Eastern Europe. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Thursday said the West’s proposals contained some positive elements, but only on issues of secondary concern to Moscow. Putin would respond promptly to the letters, a Kremlin official said the same day, indicating diplomacy could continue.</p> <p>Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said the letters, written in coordination with Ukraine, set out a serious diplomatic path forward. But the Kremlin may not budge from its desire for a grand bargain, while NATO has said it will maintain an open-door policy for potential members.</p> <p>There was little optimism that Macron’s phone call would make a decisive difference — throughout his five-year term, his diplomatic initiatives have so far yielded limited results. Just this week, four-way talks involving Paris, Berlin, Moscow and Kyiv ended without a deal, though the parties agreed to resume face-to-face talks in two weeks.</p> <p>“You have to place it in a broader context of a president who tries — and often fails — to solve crises,” said Bruno Tertrais, deputy director of France’s Foundation for Strategic Research.</p>



“Shaky diplomacy continues, which is the only option we have,” said Marie Mendras, a French political scientist at Sciences Po Paris who focuses on Russia.

On Thursday, U.S. officials again sought to firm up support in Europe. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held his first-ever phone call with his counterpart in Romania, a NATO member near Ukraine. And in a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, President Biden pledged more financial and diplomatic support, while reaffirming that Washington would “respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine,” according to a White House readout.

Zelensky expressed hope that the United States would take further steps to enhance defense cooperation, his office said.

On the same day, the Pentagon said for the first time that elements of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, XVIII Airborne Corps, and the 4th Infantry Division were among the 8,500 troops put on high alert ahead of a possible deployment to Eastern Europe.

The Russian threat to Ukraine has also helped unify the West in a way that is potentially surprising to the Kremlin, said Tara Varma, head of the European Council on Foreign Relations’ Paris office. “I don’t think Russia takes Europe seriously when it comes to military issues, and they thought that it would be very easy to destabilize the continent.”

One notable crack in the Western response includes diverging energy interests between Germany and other European Union members. The continent depends on Russia for about 40 percent of its natural gas needs, and Berlin has been working to set up Nord Stream 2, a major pipeline that would carry Russian gas to the German coast. Many fear that the activation of the pipeline would increase German dependence on Russia.

And Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said Friday that he wanted to increase gas supplies to his country from Russia, according to Reuters. Budapest is a NATO member, though Orban has closer ties to Putin than other alliance leaders.

Germany has also been scorned by Ukraine and some other allies for refusing to send defensive weapons, instead choosing to provide the beleaguered country with 5,000 helmets.

But Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, one of the more hawkish members of the German government, told lawmakers Thursday that Berlin would be open to scrapping the Nord Stream 2 project as part of a “broad range” of potential punitive measures in the event Russia renews its aggression against Ukraine. The remarks came after U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price declared that Nord Stream 2 wouldn’t proceed if Russia launched an attack.

As the West tries to tamp down rising tensions, ordinary Ukrainians are preparing for the worst.

Oleksiy Bida, a 47-year-old graphic designer, has been training as a reservist member of the 130th defense battalion for the past two years. He said he had long been a committed pacifist, but Russian threats have changed the equation.

“I thought that any conflict could be resolved through peaceful means,” he said. “But I don’t believe that anymore — not with Russia.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Record number ACA health plan sign-ups
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/27/affordable-care-act-record-enrollment/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/27/affordable-care-act-record-enrollment/</a>
GIST	About 14.5 million Americans have signed up to get health coverage this year through Affordable Care Act insurance marketplaces, eclipsing the previous record enrollment by nearly 2 million.

The popularity of ACA health plans is a substantial slice of good news for President Biden, who has made expanding access to affordable health insurance one of his principal domestic policy aims, while some approaches he favors to achieve that goal have stalled on Capitol Hill.

The enrollment figure is the heart of a report released Thursday by the Department of Health and Human Services. The White House issued a statement from the president in advance, in which Biden said he was proud that the sign-ups are “the highest numbers ever produced in an open enrollment period.”

The tally is not quite final, so it probably will be higher in the end.

The 14.5 million figure includes a final count of 10.3 million consumers who chose health plans during the most recent open-enrollment window through HealthCare.gov, the federal insurance marketplace on which 33 states rely. For 17 states and the District of Columbia, which run their own insurance marketplaces under the ACA, the data released Thursday includes 4.2 million sign-ups they had through Jan. 15, the deadline for the federal open enrollment.

Five state-run marketplaces plus the District’s are still open for consumers to buy health coverage for 2022. And three states and the District have created special enrollment periods that will allow uninsured residents longer to sign up for ACA coverage.

The ACA is a sprawling health-care law, pushed through a Democratic Congress in 2010, that has become a source of partisan warring ever since.

The insurance marketplaces created under the law began offering coverage in 2014.

The health plans are intended for consumers who cannot get affordable benefits through a job, meaning they must buy plans on their own — a part of the U.S. insurance industry that was especially dysfunctional in the past, with companies charging high prices for such individual coverage and rejecting many people with medical conditions. The ACA stopped the practice of spurning or overcharging people with preexisting conditions and for the first time provided federal subsidies to most people buying marketplace plans.

President Donald Trump was a vehement foe of the law. During his administration, he and a Republican Congress repeatedly tried to repeal large parts of the statute but didn’t succeed. Trump and his health-care aides nevertheless took aim at the insurance marketplaces, slashing federal money for advertising and other outreach activities, as well as for “navigators” who serve as community-level enrollment coaches.

Biden’s arrival in the White House a year ago marked a striking turnabout. The president moved swiftly to rehabilitate the law as the main tool to expand the number of Americans with insurance coverage and to make health plans more affordable. It had been a central campaign goal but assumed greater significance as the pandemic cost millions of people their jobs and health benefits — and as the coronavirus laid bare the importance of being able to get appropriate care when sick.

ACA open-enrollment periods typically run for several weeks starting mid-fall for the coming year. A week into his presidency, Biden announced an unprecedented special enrollment period for eligible people to buy an ACA health plan if they needed coverage because of the pandemic. The period eventually stretched six months and attracted 2.8 million people to sign up for plans.

The coronavirus relief law Congress adopted in March contained the first expansion of federal subsidies for ACA health plans in the program’s history. Through the end of this year, the law, known as the American Rescue Plan, increases tax credits for monthly insurance payments and allows people with higher incomes to qualify for such help.

And the administration reversed its predecessor’s cuts in funding for outreach and navigators, putting more money into those activities than in the past. Federal health officials also extended the open-enrollment period a month longer than it had been in recent years.

During a call with reporters Thursday to announce the large number of sign-ups, Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said, “It’s historic, but it’s not accidental or coincidental that so many people have quality health insurance and peace of mind.”

Becerra highlighted that several states that run their own insurance exchanges are giving residents more time to sign up but did not say whether the federal government will reprise the special enrollment time Biden ordered in his first year. The secretary has hinted before that is possible.

The number of people who sign up for an ACA health plan typically dips somewhat as bills from insurance companies arrive. People secure coverage only if they pay whatever share of the monthly premiums they owe after taking into account the subsidy that most consumers get.

Still, even without being final, the new sign-up figure is 21 percent greater than the final enrollment — 12 million — in federal and state marketplaces a year ago. The previous record was nearly 12.7 million sign-ups for 2016, the marketplaces’ third year. Even during the Trump years, ACA enrollment never fell below 11 million, and it increased slightly for 2021, during the pandemic.

Nearly 2.4 million people who chose health plans through Healthcare.gov for this year are new to the ACA marketplaces, HHS figures show, compared with 1.9 million a year ago.

The marketplaces’ increased popularity contrasts with the fate of other health policies Biden espouses.

Congress has never seriously considered some of his campaign positions, such as creating a public insurance alternative to compete with private health plans. Other goals, such as adding Medicare benefits and helping insure more low-income people in states that have not expanded Medicaid under the ACA, have become bogged down as Democrats battle over the social spending bill that proponents call Build Back Better. Under the legislation, the expansion of insurance subsidies would continue for additional years.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 When is Covid-19 pandemic over?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-01-27/endemic-new-normal-chatter-intensifies-as-u-s-coronavirus-cases-start-to-decline">https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-01-27/endemic-new-normal-chatter-intensifies-as-u-s-coronavirus-cases-start-to-decline</a>
GIST	<p>Experts are striking a noticeably more hopeful tone as the omicron coronavirus variant’s wave in the U.S. appears to be turning the corner.</p> <p>With increased levels of immunity due to vaccines and the massive number of infections caused by omicron, talks of whether the U.S. is approaching a “new normal” are intensifying. But the shift to endemic – or a state when the presence of the coronavirus is constant but predictable – is a ways away.</p> <p>“When you have over 2,000 deaths, 150,000 hospitalizations, and you have people who are now getting infected to the tune of somewhere around 700,000 a day, we’re not there yet,” leading infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said of reaching an “acceptable situation” with the coronavirus at a Wednesday press conference.</p> <p>Coronavirus cases and hospitalizations in the U.S. are decreasing but remain at overall very high levels. With several states <a href="#">yet to see their peaks</a>, omicron’s damage is far from over.</p> <p>“There are places where their hospitalizations are still very much climbing, and certainly in the western part of the country there are still deep worries there that the trends are not yet in the direction that they need to be,” Jennifer Nuzzo of the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security said during an online event on Wednesday.</p>

Despite the statistics, more political figures and health officials are shifting their language to an optimistic tone.

President Joe Biden last week said the U.S. hasn't yet reached its "new normal," adding that "it will get better."

"We're moving toward a time when COVID-19 won't disrupt our daily lives, where COVID-19 won't be a crisis but something to protect against and treat," Biden said during a press conference.

In Europe, where several countries saw their omicron surges peak ahead of the U.S., talks are even more hopeful.

The top European regional official of the World Health Organization this week suggested that "omicron offers plausible hope for stabilization and normalization."

And Denmark has gone as far as to announce plans to scrap all of its coronavirus restrictions and reclassify COVID-19 as a disease that no longer poses a threat to society despite infections remaining at record-high levels.

### **What Does Endemic Mean?**

Experts generally agree that the coronavirus will not be eradicated, but they also note that every previous pandemic has ended. The expectation for COVID-19 is that it will eventually shift from a pandemic, when unpredictable infections affect multiple countries, to endemic, when illness is consistently present but limited to certain areas.

Fauci described the future situation with COVID-19 as reaching a level of "sufficient control" where the virus "does not disrupt us in society, does not dominate our lives, not prevent us [from doing] the things that we generally do under normal existence."

"That would be a level of infection, but more importantly, concentrating on the severity of disease, hospitalizations and deaths that fall within the category of what we generally accept," Fauci said this week. "We don't like it, but we accept it."

Fauci said it's possible to reach this shift "because we have the tools with vaccines, with boosts, with masks, with tests and with antivirals."

One change in tracking the virus that some experts are already considering is watching the number of coronavirus-related hospitalizations more closely than cases.

Nicholas Reich, a professor of biostatistics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst School of Public Health and Health Sciences who helps curate an ensemble coronavirus model, said he has almost entirely stopped looking at cases.

"To me, this is part of the new normal, is that the hospitalizations are going to continue to be the key indicator," Reich said on a call with reporters on Wednesday. "I really think we as a society need to start focusing our emphasis on the hospitalization data."

Fauci has also signaled support for this shift.

"As you get further on and the infections become less severe, it is much more relevant to focus on the hospitalizations," he said earlier this month.

### **What The Near Future Could Bring**

With so many people infected by the omicron variant, levels of immunity across the U.S. have undoubtedly increased.

If trends continue, Fauci said he believes “that you will start to see a turnaround throughout the entire country,” noting it could happen in the first few weeks of February.

But WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said this month at a press briefing that the “pandemic is nowhere near over” despite some countries moving past their omicron peaks.

“There are different scenarios for how the pandemic could play out and how the acute phase could end, but it is dangerous to assume that omicron will be the last variant – or that we are in the endgame,” Tedros said. “On the contrary, globally the conditions are ideal for more variants to emerge.”

If omicron is any indicator, the situation can still change quickly and dramatically.

Fauci said that it is an “open question” as to whether omicron will mark the final wave in the pandemic.

“I would hope that that’s the case, but that would only be the case if we don’t get another variant that eludes the immune response of the prior variant,” Fauci said recently.

What comes next is “up in the air” because new variants will emerge, according to Reich.

“There’s always so much uncertainty about what can happen next,” Reich said. “Just because a model can draw a line one month, two months, six months out into the future doesn’t mean we should read it like a perfect crystal ball.”

Many countries are still seeing high levels of transmission of the virus with little vaccine coverage. The more opportunity the virus has to spread, the higher the chance it will mutate.

More than 3 billion people in the world have yet to receive a single dose of coronavirus vaccine, and experts have continually warned that the pandemic won’t end anywhere until it ends everywhere.

“If we want to stop fretting about every other Greek letter that there is to come in the alphabet, the way that we do that is that we have to bring these cases down,” Nuzzo said. “The way that we bring these case numbers down and limit opportunities for variants to arise and spread is by allowing more countries greater access to vaccines.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 US appeals to Putin’s ‘legacy’</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/us-appeals-putins-legacy-threat-war-looms-ukraine/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/us-appeals-putins-legacy-threat-war-looms-ukraine/</a>
GIST	<p>Top Biden administration officials said Thursday they are holding out hope that Russian President Vladimir Putin will embrace a legacy of peace and end a long-running military standoff along the Ukrainian border, even as top aides to the Russian leader said they see “little ground for optimism” with the threat of war looming over Eastern Europe.</p> <p>Moscow issued the gloomy rhetoric a day after the U.S. and NATO formally rejected Russian demands that the Western military alliance halt expansion, rule out Ukraine as a possible member, and limit military exercises and weapons deployments in former Soviet republics.</p> <p>That written rejection may have marked a turning point in the crisis. It made abundantly clear that the two former Cold War foes are miles apart on key points with seemingly little room to negotiate. Still, Moscow and Washington said they see potential areas of cooperation on more narrow issues, such as new arms control agreements. Analysts said the resolution may come down to what Russian President Vladimir Putin, having initiated the clash, is willing to accept short of his stated ultimatums.</p>



With more than 100,000 Russian troops poised to invade Ukraine if given the order, Mr. Putin is reviewing the American response to his demands. The bluster from other Kremlin officials matters little in the end. The Russian president will be the sole decision-maker on whether Russia pursues a fresh round of diplomacy with the U.S. and Europe or mounts an attack on Ukraine.

As part of a pledge not to negotiate Ukraine's future without consulting Kyiv, President Biden spoke again by phone with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday, a day after the U.S. and NATO delivered their written replies to the Kremlin's demands. Mr. Biden this week ordered 8,500 U.S. troops to be put on "high alert" status in case they need to deploy to Eastern Europe, where Russia has assembled more than 100,000 troops and heavy weaponry close by the tense border.

Mr. Zelenskyy said in a Twitter post that he and Mr. Biden had a "long conversation" about efforts to deescalate the crisis and U.S. military and financial support for Kyiv. Despite strong rhetorical support, Mr. Biden has repeatedly said U.S. troops will not be sent to Ukraine if a shooting war breaks out.

State Department officials went so far Thursday as to appeal to Mr. Putin's legacy. They suggested that his decisions in the coming days will dictate how he is viewed by history.

"This is a moment for diplomacy and for cool heads to prevail. That's what we want," said Victoria Nuland, undersecretary of state for political affairs. "We hope [Mr. Putin] will see here a real opportunity for a legacy of security and arms control rather than a legacy of war," she told reporters at the State Department.

Ms. Nuland stressed that the U.S. and its NATO allies remain prepared to impose "swift and severe" consequences on Russia in the form of economic sanctions and other punishments. Washington has tried to project a unified front with its European allies on sanctions, but questions are growing about whether all NATO members, especially Germany, are on the same page. The White House also announced that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz would visit Washington on Feb. 7 for his first face-to-face meeting with Mr. Biden since the crisis broke out.

Mr. Putin's top deputies said they saw no clear diplomatic path forward in light of the replies from Washington and Brussels. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there is "little ground for optimism." Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the U.S. document issued Wednesday makes some offers on secondary issues but "contains no positive response on the main issue" regarding Russia's security demands in the region.

"We cannot say that our thoughts have been taken into account or that a willingness has been shown to take our concerns into account," Mr. Peskov told reporters. He said Russia would take its time formulating a reply.

"We won't rush with our assessments," he said.

Mr. Putin did not comment on the Western responses. He is scheduled to have a phone conversation Friday with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken made clear this week that the U.S. answer affirmed that there would be no change to "core principles" such as NATO's open-door policy for emerging Eastern European democracies. That message was conveyed directly to the Kremlin in a letter from U.S. Ambassador John Sullivan. The U.S. and NATO also shot down the idea that they would halt troop deployments to NATO states in Eastern Europe on the Russian border.

Wide gulf

That position creates a wide gulf between the West and Russia. Kremlin officials stressed that they believe the true security threat in the region comes from the U.S. and its allies.

“It is clear that the military tensions in Europe will reduce if NATO withdraws its forces from Eastern European states. So this is what we call for, this is one of the key points of our proposals for NATO on guarantees of security,” said Russian Foreign Ministry deputy spokesman Alexey Zaytsev, according to Russia’s official Tass news agency.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the Russians were bulking up forces near Ukraine, including a deployment of troops in neighboring Belarus purportedly engaged in a training exercise.

“We continue to see, including in the last 24 hours, more accumulation of credible combat forces arrayed by the Russians” in western Russia and in Belarus, Mr. Kirby said in a Pentagon briefing.

U.S. officials said they coordinated closely with Ukraine and NATO allies before issuing responses. Ukrainian officials said they remain in lockstep with the West.

“This is why we speak about economic sanctions. This is why we speak about the consolidated position of all of us: so that President Putin sees that there are no weak links in our defensive chain,” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Thursday during a visit to Denmark.

Meanwhile, foreign policy analysts warn that Russia may have a few political tricks up its sleeve as the crisis unfolds. There is a growing movement in Moscow to formally recognize the independence of the Donetsk People’s Republic and other self-declared pro-Russian enclaves in eastern Ukraine. Those areas have been home to years of fighting between the Ukrainian military and pro-Russian separatists with the backing of Moscow.

Specialists say formal recognition of those areas could offer Mr. Putin a way to further chip away at Ukraine’s sovereignty, just as he did with the military annexation of Crimea in 2014. It would also represent an escalation of the crisis through nonmilitary means, putting the U.S. and NATO on the spot on how to respond.

“If Russia would want to allow more time for negotiations to play out, while also escalating pressure to compel the West to accept at least some of its core positions, then recognition of the statelets could be considered in the Kremlin as an appropriate next step,” said Andrew Lohsen, a fellow in the Europe, Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“Should Ukraine and the West make substantial concessions at that stage, then Putin would be able to proclaim a victory in the current standoff and draw down his forces rather than risk a spiraling escalation with unpredictable outcomes,” he wrote in an analysis this week.

The State Department’s Ms. Nuland said the Russians’ acknowledgment that they were still studying the U.S. response was a small source of hope.

“The most important thing we heard from Moscow today is that the documents are with President Putin, that he is studying them,” Ms. Nuland said. “From where we’re standing, the ball is in their court, but we are ready for talks ... whenever they are ready.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/28 US, Germany pipeline warnings to Russia
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/28/us-and-germany-step-up-pipeline-warnings-to-russia-as-un-meeting-called">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/28/us-and-germany-step-up-pipeline-warnings-to-russia-as-un-meeting-called</a>
GIST	<p>The United States and Germany have stepped up warnings to Russia that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline will be at stake if it invades Ukraine, as Washington voiced hope for a diplomatic way out despite frigid statements from Moscow.</p> <p>A day after the US and its allies formally responded to security demands issued by Russia, officials in Moscow said their chief concerns were not addressed but notably did not rule out new talks.</p>

The US has warned Russia of swift and severe consequences if it invades Ukraine after Moscow amassed tens of thousands of troops on the border with its Western-leaning neighbour.

Following talk of divisions within Europe, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock told parliament that her government was “working on a strong package of sanctions” alongside allies that would include Nord Stream 2.

The pipeline, which Germany has defiantly built despite criticism by the US and eastern Europeans, will more than double supplies of Russian natural gas to Europe’s largest economy.

In Washington, a senior official voiced confidence that an invasion would stop Germany from activating the multibillion-dollar project, which was completed in September but still requires testing and regulatory approval.

“If Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another, Nord Stream 2 will not move forward,” said Victoria Nuland, the US undersecretary of state for political affairs. “I think the statements coming out of Berlin even today are very, very strong.”

It follows comments by a US state department spokesperson on Wednesday night spelling out that the pipeline, which promises to be very lucrative for its Russian owner, Gazprom, would not go ahead if Vladimir Putin sanctions an attack on Ukraine.

The White House announced on Thursday that Germany’s new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, will visit Washington on 7 February to discuss the crisis with president Joe Biden.

Stepping up the diplomatic offensive, the US called a public meeting on Monday at the UN security council on Russia’s “threatening behaviour”, hoping to bring condemnation even though Moscow can veto any resolutions.

Biden also spoke on Thursday by telephone with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and said the US was considering economic support after \$650m in military assistance over the past year.

Biden “reaffirmed the readiness of the United States along with its allies and partners to respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine”, a White House statement said.

But Biden, in a recognition of the dangers of the moment, repeated his warning that Ukraine could indeed face a Russian invasion next month.

“President Biden said that there is a distinct possibility that the Russians could invade Ukraine in February,” national security council spokesperson Emily Horne said.

Nato has put 8,500 troops on standby over the Ukraine crisis, in scenes reminiscent of the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Russia denies any plans to invade but last month demanded wide-ranging security guarantees from the west, including that Ukraine never be allowed to join the US-led Nato military alliance.

Washington on Wednesday delivered a reply in coordination with Nato allies such as the UK and France, saying Ukraine had the right to determine its own allies but offering Russia talks on missile placements and other mutual concerns.

In a first reaction, the Kremlin was unimpressed but cautious.

“It cannot be said that our views were taken into account,” president Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

“Let’s not rush into assessments; it takes time to analyse.”

Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, said Moscow’s chief concern – the potential for Ukraine to join Nato – had been ignored, but that it would be possible to move forward on other issues.

“There is a response which gives hope for the start of a serious conversation on secondary questions,” said Lavrov, who is expected to hold new talks soon with the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken.

“There’s only one decider in Moscow and that is president Putin,” Nuland said for her part. “We hope he will see here a real opportunity for a legacy of security and arms control rather than a legacy of war.

On the streets of Kyiv, there were concerns that Ukraine had been forgotten amid high-level talks between Moscow, Nato and Washington.

“The United States is provoking Russia and Russia is provoking the United States. And somewhere in the middle is Ukraine,” said Dmytro Sylenko, a 23-year-old businessman.

“Honestly, I don’t care who is provoking whom, what matters to me is that there is peace,” he said.

Russia, which has a fraught historical relationship with Ukraine, has fueled an insurgency in the former Soviet republic’s east that has killed more than 13,000 people since 2014.

That year Russia also seized Crimea after the overthrow of a pro-Russian government in Kyiv.

In a separate bid to defuse tensions, senior Russian and Ukrainian officials held a marathon eight hours of talks on Wednesday in Paris and agreed to meet again in two weeks in Berlin.

Adding to tensions, a 21-year-old Ukrainian national guard conscript opened fire at an aerospace factory on Thursday, killing five people, although there was no indication of a link to the Russia standoff.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 GAO: HHS failing to meet responsibilities</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/27/us-federal-health-agency-failing-crises-watchdog">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/27/us-federal-health-agency-failing-crises-watchdog</a>
GIST	<p>The US government’s main health agency is failing to meet its responsibilities for leading the national response to public health emergencies – including the coronavirus pandemic – extreme weather disasters and even potential bioterrorist attacks, a federal watchdog said Thursday.</p> <p>The nonpartisan Government Accountability Office said it is designating the Health and Human Services Department’s leadership and coordination of public health emergencies as a “high risk” area for the government.</p> <p>While that designation carries no immediate penalties, it signals to Congress that lawmakers need to pay special attention to the agency’s operations.</p> <p>Long-standing “persistent deficiencies” at HHS “have hindered the nation’s response to the current Covid-19 pandemic and a variety of past threats,” the GAO said in its report. “If left unaddressed, these deficiencies will continue to hamper the nation’s ability to be prepared for, and effectively respond to, future threats.”</p> <p>The shortfalls include managing the medical supply chain, coordinating with federal and state agencies and providing clear and consistent communication to the public and the health care community, the GAO said.</p>

	<p>The report is part of the GAO’s evaluation of the government’s pandemic response. It was released as US senators of both parties came out with draft legislation this week calling for a close study of the pandemic and an overhaul of HHS’ capabilities.</p> <p>Among the lawmakers’ priorities are closer congressional oversight of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an HHS agency, building out the supply chain and improving coordination from the top rungs of HHS. Some of those address issues raised by the GAO report.</p> <p>The report did not assign blame to individual officials, in the current or past administrations.</p> <p>The GAO said that of 115 recommendations it has made to HHS over the past 15 years on public health emergencies, 72 have not been fully put in place.</p> <p>Last year, the White House issued a plan for updating the pandemic response, but it was not couched in terms of fixing serious shortcomings.</p> <p>Under both the Biden and the Trump administrations, HHS has taken a back seat to the White House in management of the coronavirus pandemic even though its scientists, doctors, disease detectives and service providers carry out most of the day-to-day work.</p> <p>The GAO said it found “persistent deficiencies” in five main areas. They include establishing clear responsibilities for government agencies, collecting and analyzing data to inform decision-makers and providing clear communication to the public.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 Storm: southern Africa national disasters</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/28/dozens-killed-in-tropical-storm-ana-as-southern-africa-braces-for-more-wild-weather">https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/28/dozens-killed-in-tropical-storm-ana-as-southern-africa-braces-for-more-wild-weather</a>
GIST	<p>The death toll from a storm that struck three southern African countries has risen to 77 as emergency teams battled to repair damaged infrastructure and help tens of thousands of victims.</p> <p>Tropical Storm Ana made landfall in Madagascar on Monday before ploughing into <a href="#">Mozambique</a> and Malawi through the week, bringing torrential rains</p> <p>Rescue workers and authorities across the three countries were assessing the full extent of the damage on Friday morning, even as another storm was forming in the Indian Ocean.</p> <p>Madagascar on Thursday night declared a state of national disaster as the death toll rose to 48. Mozambique reported 18 killed while 11 had died in Malawi.</p> <p>Remnants of the storm have passed over Zimbabwe, but no deaths have been reported.</p> <p>In the three hardest-hit countries, tens of thousands of homes were damaged. Some collapsed under the heavy rain, trapping victims in the rubble.</p> <p>Swollen rivers washed away bridges and submerged fields, drowning livestock and destroying the livelihoods of rural families.</p> <p>In Madagascar, 130,000 people fled their homes. In the capital, Antananarivo, schools and gyms were turned into emergency shelters.</p> <p>“We only brought our most important possessions,” Berthine Razafiarisoa, who sheltered in a gym with his family of 10, said.</p>

In northern and central Mozambique, Ana destroyed 10,000 homes and dozens of schools and hospitals, while downing power lines.

Mozambique and international weather services warned that another storm, named Batsirai, has formed over the Indian Ocean and was expected to make landfall over the weekend.

It “might evolve into a severe tropical storm in the next few days”, the United Nations said in a statement. Up to six tropical cyclones are expected before the rainy season ends in March.

“The situation is of extreme concern” and “vulnerability is very, very high,” the UN’s resident coordinator in Mozambique, Myrta Kaulard, said.

“The challenge is titanic, the challenge is extreme,” she said, noting that the storms were hitting “an already extremely vulnerable” region still trying to recover from [cyclones Idai and Kenneth, which hit the region in 2019](#).

“Mozambique is responding to a complex crisis in the north which has caused an additional enormous strain on the budget of the country, on the population,” Kaulard said. “In addition there is also Covid.”

In neighbouring [Malawi](#), the government declared a state of natural disaster.

Most of the country lost electricity early in the week, after floodwaters hit generating stations. Power was restored by Thursday in parts of the country, but parts of the electric grid were destroyed.

“Our priority now is restoring power to health establishments, water treatment distribution systems and schools,” the national power utility said in a statement.

Southern Africa, and especially Mozambique, has suffered destructive storms repeatedly in recent years.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 IMF: China economic imbalances worsened</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/imf-says-chinas-economic-imbalances-have-worsened-11643356801?mod=hp_lead_pos10">https://www.wsj.com/articles/imf-says-chinas-economic-imbalances-have-worsened-11643356801?mod=hp_lead_pos10</a>
GIST	<p>Imbalances in the Chinese economy have worsened and delayed China’s transition to consumption-led growth, the International Monetary Fund said in an annual review on Friday, slashing its outlook for the country this year.</p> <p>The IMF assessment, in its Article IV review, reflects growing concern among some economists and officials that greater state intervention in the economy could be hindering China’s long-held goal of “high-quality” growth—one driven by consumption rather than investment.</p> <p>Beijing has pulled off an impressive economic recovery since early 2020, when authorities locked down much of the country to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. The economy grew 8.1% last year, a sharp improvement from 2.3% for all of 2020. But the rebound has relied heavily on state-sector investments and exports, while private spending has plunged. And in the final months of 2021, growth slowed markedly.</p> <p>Authorities’ strict pandemic restrictions have made consumers hesitant to spend. A cascade of policy measures over the past year—centered on reining in what President Xi Jinping views as capitalist excesses, including property speculation—have also damped the sentiment among both private businesses and individuals.</p> <p>Reflecting continued weakness in consumption, the IMF now expects China’s gross domestic product to expand 4.8% this year, down from its previous projection of 5.7%. “Growth momentum has slowed</p>



considerably, with consumption lagging every other part of the GDP,” said Helge Berger, the IMF’s mission chief for China.

What’s more, states the IMF review: “The investment-driven recovery has reversed earlier, hard-won progress in rebalancing, adding to the challenges of achieving sustainable high-quality growth over the medium term.”

China’s leadership is likely to set a growth target of about 5.5% for 2022, according to Chinese economists who consult with the government. While the figure might seem low for a country that has consistently boasted world-beating growth rates, it might still prove overly optimistic, given that economic expansion sharply decelerated to 4% in the final quarter of last year.

Some economists have questioned the rationale behind what they see as an ambitious growth target, as it inevitably would entail greater government spending on big-ticket projects, further pushing up China’s already-high debt levels.

But there is political pressure to ensure still-strong growth ahead of a major Communist Party conclave late in the year, when Mr. Xi is expected to claim a tradition-busting third term. Part of his belief that “the East is rising and the West is in decline,” said a government-affiliated Chinese economist, involves China’s economy continuing to outperform that of the developed world, especially the U.S.

The U.S. economy expanded 6.9% in the fourth quarter, capping the strongest year of growth in nearly four decades.

To bolster sagging economic activities, Beijing has stepped up monetary and fiscal easing, cutting interest rates, prodding banks to lend and getting local governments to increase infrastructure-related spending.

“We’d like China to do better than 4.8%,” Mr. Berger of the IMF said. “But what’s currently in the policy pipeline is not enough.”

IMF recommendations to Chinese authorities include allowing a higher fiscal deficit, which could let the government slash taxes on businesses, or a redirection of government resources toward households as opposed to more public investments.

“Channeling funds into the pockets of low-income families could help spur consumption,” Mr. Berger said.

But so far, China’s policy makers have focused on using supply-side measures to boost production as opposed to taking steps to lift consumer spending in any meaningful way.

The uneven recovery in China’s economy is also amplifying a trend of declining growth in productivity, or output per worker and unit of capital, according to the IMF report. China’s productivity growth has declined markedly in recent years, as the state sector gets bigger, crowding out private firms that tend to be nimbler and more profitable.

The report shows that state-owned enterprises are, on average, only 80% as productive as private firms in the same sector. Yet, state companies are playing an increasingly important role in China’s economy, with authorities turning to them to ensure supplies during the pandemic and implement Beijing’s technological self-sufficiency drive amid increased tensions with the West.

The IMF has called on China to carry out long-awaited state-sector reforms and to make it easier for private firms to compete with state companies.

Beijing partly blames delays of such reform on a tense climate with major trading partners, primarily the U.S.

	According to the report, Chinese authorities have stressed to the IMF that “external decoupling pressures” are adding economic headwinds, which Beijing says necessitates giving state-owned firms a bigger role in strategic sectors.
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Economy grows but obstacles persist</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-economy-bounced-back-q4-gdp-11643235508?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-economy-bounced-back-q4-gdp-11643235508?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>The U.S. economy grew rapidly in the fourth quarter of last year, advancing to a 6.9% annual rate, capping the strongest year of growth in nearly four decades as the country rebounded quickly from the pandemic-induced recession.</p> <p>But growth recently has run into obstacles that could lead to more modest growth this year, economists say.</p> <p>Gross domestic product, the broadest measure of goods and services, in the fourth quarter <a href="#">accelerated from the third quarter's growth of 2.3%</a>, adjusted for inflation, the Commerce Department said Thursday. The gain reflected solid spending by households, much of it occurring early in the quarter, and companies pushed to rebuild depleted inventories as they try to overcome <a href="#">persistent supply shortages</a>.</p> <p>Output grew 5.5% in all of 2021, when comparing the fourth quarter to the same period a year earlier. The economy hasn't grown that fast since 1984, during President Ronald Reagan's first term, when the country was rebounding from a double-dip recession and an era of high inflation.</p> <p>Output had fallen 2.3% in 2020, the first contraction since the housing crisis and financial crash in 2008. “The U.S. has learned to adapt to the new world of variants and continues to produce,” said Beth Ann Bovino, chief U.S. economist at S&amp;P Global Ratings.</p> <p>Stocks rose broadly Thursday morning after the GDP report, but they retreated later in the day, with the Nasdaq falling 1.4%, the S&amp;P 500 dropping 0.54%, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average off 0.02%.</p> <p>Thursday's report contained warning signs. Most of the growth owed to companies' restocking rather than people and firms buying stuff. In part, the rise in inventory investment reflected a rebound from super-low inventory levels in the summer. Inventory levels remain low because of persistent shortages. Excluding the inventory effects, output grew at a modest annual rate of 1.9% in the fourth quarter.</p> <p>Americans reined in shopping toward the end of the quarter, according to other Commerce Department data on retail sales, as the <a href="#">Omicron variant of Covid-19</a> triggered a new wave of infections and higher prices <a href="#">cut into their paychecks</a>. A separate Commerce Department report Thursday showed sales of durable goods—long-lasting items such as cars, refrigerators and bulldozers—fell in December.</p> <p>“The headline 6.9% figure is probably a bit overly optimistic assessment of the underlying strength of demand,” said Andrew Hunter, chief U.S. economist at the research firm Capital Economics. “We do think it's increasingly the case that the economy is essentially at or rapidly approaching that capacity-constrained, potential level... The speed limit is lower now than it was before the pandemic.”</p> <p>Two factors that helped drive last year's expansion—a torrent of cash sent from Congress to households and ultralow borrowing costs stoked by the Federal Reserve's loose-money policies—are fading. Households have spent down some of the stimulus money. And the Fed reaffirmed this week its intention to raise interest rates, as early as March, to combat a sharp rise in inflation, which has damaged consumer confidence and outpaced the growth in workers' wages.</p> <p>The Fed's preferred inflation measure—the price index for personal-consumption expenditures—rose at an annual rate of 6.5% in the fourth quarter, accelerating from the third quarter's 5.3% growth rate and more than triple the growth from the period immediately leading up to the pandemic.</p>

“The path of the economy continues to depend on the course of the virus,” the Fed said in a written statement this week. “Progress on vaccinations and an easing of supply constraints are expected to support continued gains in economic activity and employment as well as a reduction in inflation. Risks to the economic outlook remain, including from new variants of the virus.”

Most economists think U.S. output will grow modestly this year. Americans still have higher savings compared to before the pandemic, and jobs are plentiful. “Household balance sheets look to be the healthiest basically since we’ve been tracking this data” starting in the 1980s, Dr. Bovino of S&P Global Ratings said.

The biggest challenge for the economy right now is not demand, but supply.

While U.S. producers are making more goods and services than they did prior to the pandemic, they are doing so with fewer workers. Employment across the U.S. was down by 3.6 million workers, or 2.3%, in December 2021 compared to February 2020, Labor Department data show.

“Businesses are not only struggling to get the goods components to make the product, they need the people as well to put the components together,” Dr. Bovino said.

In the latest sign of a tight labor market, initial jobless claims—a measure of how many workers were laid off—fell by 30,000 last week, the Labor Department said Thursday.

While economists and health officials expect the effects of the Omicron variant to fade in coming months, the illness is for now restraining the economic recovery.

Strum Contracting Co., a Baltimore-based welding and fabrication construction company, had been until early this month working to improve a port in Sparrows Point, south of Baltimore. Then an outbreak of Covid-19 cases among workers caused the company to shut down the project for a week, said company CEO Teaera Strum. The shutdown cost the company about \$18,000 in lost revenue, she said.

“When you’re having to quarantine entire crews, that puts you behind schedule,” said Ms. Strum, who added that the company has also struggled to fill openings for welders and a project manager. “Because we do a lot of state and federal work, we still have hard deadlines. So Covid or not, we still have to meet those deadlines.”

Strum’s struggles are representative of a broader problem in the economy: Demand for companies has been solid, if not strong, but supplies—whether of goods or workers—are running tight. Those shortages are stoking inflation.

The forecasting firm IHS Markit projects that output will grow at a 2% annual rate in January through March. That would mark the weakest quarter of growth since the recovery began in mid-2020. The company gave an early peek at economic growth this week when it reported that its index of U.S. services and manufacturing activity—covering most of economic activity—slowed sharply.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 What is the omicron variant BA.2?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-we-know-about-the-ba-2-omicron-variant-11643300997?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos4">https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-we-know-about-the-ba-2-omicron-variant-11643300997?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos4</a>
GIST	<p>As newly reported cases of Covid-19 <a href="#">decline in parts of the U.S.</a>, researchers around the world are monitoring a new variant of <a href="#">the Omicron variant dubbed BA.2</a>. The variant is under observation by countries including Denmark, India and the U.K., though little is still known about its properties and the threat it may pose.</p> <p>Here’s what scientists and public-health experts know so far about the BA.2 variant:</p>

### **What is the BA.2 variant of Covid-19?**

The BA.2 variant of Covid-19 is a relation of the widely-spreading [original Omicron variant](#) known as BA.1, according to Theodora Hatzioannou, an associate professor of virology at Rockefeller University.

The two variants arose around the same time and come from the same immediate ancestor strain. They have many mutations in common but there are also around 20 mutations that are different between the two variants. The differences between this variant and BA.1 can be seen in the spike protein of the virus, Dr. Hatzioannou said.

[Viruses mutate all the time](#) and diversification within a variant is normal. The earlier Delta variant comprised more than 200 sublineages before it was replaced by Omicron, according to Francois Balloux, director of the University College London Genetics Institute.

### **Is the BA.2 variant in the U.S.?**

Yes. The BA.2 variant has been detected in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which provides estimates of the [prevalence of various Covid-19 strains](#). The [CDC's estimates](#) show that Omicron was likely responsible for 99.9% of Covid-19 infections in the week ending Jan. 22. The CDC said the prevalence of some other variants including BA.2 was included in the Omicron tally.

### **Where else in the world has the BA.2 variant been detected?**

At least 40 countries have detected the BA.2 variant, including the U.K., Denmark, India, Sweden, Singapore and the Philippines. It isn't possible at this point to determine where the sublineage originated, according to the U.K. Health Security Agency.

The BA.2 variant may be displacing the BA.1 in Denmark, said Dr. Hatzioannou. "They're identifying more and more cases of BA.2 rather than BA.1," she said.

### **Is BA.2 a Covid-19 variant of concern?**

No. The World Health Organization designated Omicron [the fifth "variant of concern"](#) in November based on the risks posed by changes in its makeup and behavior compared with other versions of the virus, including its increased infectiousness. It hasn't given BA.2 any designation but has urged researchers to closely track and study the variant. Earlier [variants of concern included Delta](#), which drove a wave of cases in the U.S. and elsewhere last summer, and Beta, which like Omicron was [first identified in South Africa](#).

Other variants [have remained variants of interest](#), meaning they have genetic changes that affect the way the virus works, according to the WHO. [Lambda and Mu](#) are variants of interest that sickened people in some parts of the world, such as South America, but [didn't outcompete variants](#) including Delta in the U.S. and elsewhere.

### **What are the symptoms for the BA.2 variant? Is the BA.2 variant more severe than the Omicron variant?**

It isn't clear whether the BA.2 variant behaves in materially different ways than the Omicron variant, which research has shown to be [far more infectious than previous strains](#) but also less likely to lead to severe disease in many cases.

In Denmark, one of the countries with high rates of BA.2, an initial analysis by the government-run State Serum Institute showed no differences in hospitalizations for BA.2 compared with BA.1.

Though BA.2 continues to spread in different countries, the CDC said the variant was responsible for a very small share of recent Covid-19 infections compared with other circulating viruses in the U.S. and around the world. "Currently there is no evidence that the BA.2 lineage is more severe than the BA.1 lineage. [The] CDC continues to monitor variants that are circulating both domestically and internationally," said the agency.

### How is the BA.2 variant responding to treatment and vaccinations?

Though it is too early to tell, Dr. Hatzioannou predicts the BA.2 variant will be [as resistant to monoclonal antibodies](#) as BA.1. She said there are only slight differences on the spike protein of BA.2 compared with BA.1, leading her to conclude that they are likely to behave similarly. [The monoclonal antibody treatment](#) made by [GlaxoSmithKline PLC](#) may be effective in treating this variant because it has been successful in treating BA.1. [Pfizer Inc.](#) and [Merck & Co.](#) antiviral pills for Covid-19 [continue to work](#) against the original Omicron variant and may have similar effects against BA.2.

Researchers predict that there won't be a significant difference in how vaccines hold up against BA.2, compared with the original Omicron. Most of the mutation differences between the two variants occur outside areas of the virus that are important for immune recognition. Studies are under way to confirm this.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Costs jump for Highway 520 bridge work
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/cost-of-highway-520-rebuild-rises-406-million-for-stretch-near-capitol-hill/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/cost-of-highway-520-rebuild-rises-406-million-for-stretch-near-capitol-hill/</a>
GIST	<p>Gov. Jay Inslee <a href="#">wants to use a half-billion dollars</a> in federal pandemic relief money to keep up with rapid cost increases on the Highway 520 bridge replacement, and widenings for the Eastside's combined Interstate 405/Highway 167 program.</p> <p>That spending, which has to be approved by the Legislature, is supposed to protect both megaprojects, already delayed, from losing more time. Federal cash also helps elected officials avoid even considering a gasoline tax increase, sparing both parties the risk of angering voters in an election year.</p> <p>That's a change from 2021, when lawmakers almost raised the gas tax by 9.8 cents per gallon, and did enact a carbon-pricing system that starts in 2023. Rather than boost taxes now, Senate Democrats filed a <a href="#">2022 transportation budget bill</a> that reflects a big federal infusion.</p> <p>The newly disclosed cost spikes illustrate how highways face the same strains as transit: rising labor and materials prices; a shortage of big-time contractors that generates higher bids; and lost engineering time early in the COVID-19 outbreak. Also, Inslee <a href="#">suspended some road projects</a> temporarily after Tim Eyman's Initiative 976 passed in 2019 to reduce car-tab taxes, only to be <a href="#">shot down by the Supreme Court</a> for a misleading ballot title.</p> <p>Highway inflation isn't as well-known as Sound Transit's current <a href="#">\$6.5 billion funding shortfall in three counties, blamed largely on land prices and estimating errors</a>. They're related, because Sound Transit's Stride bus rapid transit on I-405, which <a href="#">voters approved to begin in 2024</a>, is already <a href="#">delayed until 2027</a> or 2028, and would slip further if the state loses more time on I-405 roadbuilding that provides bus-entrance lanes, and new toll lanes where buses could move fast along the freeway.</p> <p>The governor's plan fits a purpose of federal relief money, which is replacing lost state revenues, said Erik Hansen, senior analyst for the state Office of Financial Management. WSDOT also lost <a href="#">toll income</a> when traffic plunged in 2020-21.</p> <p>"It will let us stay on top of critical projects on major highways, like the 520, 405 and 167 corridors that we do not want to see halted," Inslee said when <a href="#">announcing his proposed budget</a> last month.</p> <p>On the other hand, those are dollars states may apply to other infrastructure such as water and sewer projects, or even human services.</p> <p>The state received a total <a href="#">\$4.4 billion in American Rescue Plan Act</a> money, and entered 2022 with <a href="#">\$1.3 billion unspent</a>, of which the two big highway projects would get \$500 million. Federal pandemic aid of all kinds</p>

to Washington state [totaled around \\$11 billion](#), the vast majority going to households, medical needs and schools.

House Transportation Committee Chair Jake Fey, D-Tacoma, said the governor's plan isn't a done deal. He proposes eliminating sales tax on Highway 520 construction and supplies, thus conserving \$200 million for that project, then reserve ARPA money for other programs.

However, Fey defends using federal funds for roads, noting the general fund [enjoys a surplus](#) while recent transportation revenues dipped in the pandemic.

"You have to have a functioning transportation system, for the state to be successful," he said.

WSDOT began planning in 1997 and broke ground in 2011 to replace the Highway 520 segment between I-405 and I-5, to be completed in the early 2030s. The original floating and fixed bridge spans opened in 1963, and drivers still travel over concrete columns that could shatter in an earthquake.

Transportation Secretary Roger Millar described the rescue act transfer as preservation funds, saying Wednesday it sustains a needed replacement of the seismically weak Highway 520 structures, improving "lifeline" access after any future disaster.

The Highway 520 program requires \$406 million in new money, to reach a total \$5.1 billion, the [Legislature's budget records show](#). Of that, \$200 million would be federal relief dollars under Inslee's proposal, with the remainder from state transportation accounts and a bond sale next decade.

The connection in Seattle will be completed in 2031-33, about five years after the former 2027 goal, said [Dawn Yankauskas, deputy 520 administrator for WSDOT](#). A new Montlake Interchange is now being built, followed by a concrete girder Portage Bay Bridge, a scenic north Capitol Hill lid, and a [busway from 520 into the I-5](#) Express Lanes.

WSDOT added features after talks with the community, Yankauskas said. A bike lane will be added to the Portage Bay bridge, along with bike-trail connections around Capitol Hill, she said. The lid [will have better viewpoints](#) toward the bay and Lake Washington.

Geotechnical studies [for the bus interchange](#) found unstable soils on Capitol Hill. Those require a stronger retaining wall and deep foundations for the lid and Portage Bay segment too, she said.

Sloppy soils have been known about for six decades, when a landslide interfered with construction of the original Highway 520. But Yankauskas said that in recent engineering, "We started to understand we were dealing with something much greater than anticipated."

Fey, the Tacoma lawmaker, said, "I was shocked by the amount of the increase for 520." He expects more shortfalls as WSDOT designs the Puget Sound Gateway, the planned extensions of Highways 167 and 509 that will connect to the Port of Tacoma and Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. "I expect it will be a regular thing, which is very disconcerting," he said.

Similarly, the long-awaited I-405/Highway 167 program is \$450 million short, of which \$300 million would be covered by federal grants, and the rest through road funds and by waiving sales tax on construction. The \$4 billion plan adds toll lanes between Bellevue and Renton, several exit lanes, and new capacity near the tight Sammamish Slough crossing in Bothell.

In a Senate committee hearing, Bellevue City Councilmember Jennifer Robertson told [senators](#) her city anticipates [25,000 new jobs by 2025](#), "but with that excitement also comes immense pressure to improve access for future growth, and to also fix our existing mobility problems."

[Lawmakers last year spent](#) \$600 million of ARPA aid for roads and \$400 million for culvert replacements that improve flow for fish streams.



	<p>The 405/167 program wasn't included, Robertson testified. "Now it's time to deliver on that promise, this session."</p> <p>In yet another bit of fortune, Inslee proposed directing \$329 million from the Biden administration's new Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, for transportation preservation through 2025. That could address a crisis lawmakers and governors created in the 2000s and 2010s, by borrowing so heavily for megaprojects <a href="#">WSDOT couldn't keep up with maintenance</a> on crumbling roads and bridges.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Jobless claims fall for 3<sup>rd</sup> straight week</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/business/jobless-claims-fall-for-third-straight-week-in-wa/">https://www.seattletimes.com/business/jobless-claims-fall-for-third-straight-week-in-wa/</a>
GIST	<p>New jobless claims in Washington state fell last week, the third consecutive weekly decline, as the state job market appeared to rebound from winter layoffs and a surge in COVID-19 cases fueled by the omicron variant of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Washingtonians filed 4,731 new, or "initial," claims for jobless benefits in the week ending Saturday, according to data <a href="#">posted</a> Thursday by the state Employment Security Department. That's down 12% from the prior week, and around 40% below the pre-pandemic level from the same week in 2020.</p> <p>Washington's latest claims data comes as the nation saw <a href="#">a 10.3% drop in new claims, to 290,000</a>, the first decline in a month, the Labor Department <a href="#">reported</a> Thursday.</p> <p>In Washington, claims in late December and early January had spiked because of a combination of extreme winter, seasonal layoffs and a surge in COVID-19 cases, state economists said.</p> <p>Last week saw new claims either fall or remain virtually flat in all industries across the state.</p> <p>Just over 49,000 Washingtonians collected benefits last week, down by 8% from the week before, and total benefits paid dropped 9.2% to \$25.6 million.</p> <p>Construction workers, for example, filed 5,376 new claims last week. That's down only modestly from the prior week, when construction claims doubled, to 5,721, the highest level since May 2020.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 India schools stay closed; hope fades</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/asia/india-schools.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/asia/india-schools.html</a>
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI — Some children have forgotten the alphabet or what their classrooms look like. Others have dropped out of school entirely, scrounging for work and unlikely to ever resume their studies.</p> <p>For years, India has been counting on its vast pool of young people as a wellspring of future growth, a "demographic dividend," as many liked to put it. Now, after two years of the coronavirus pandemic, it is looking more like a lost generation, crushing the middle-class dreams of families looking for better opportunities for their children.</p> <p>Hundreds of millions of students across India have received little to no in-person instruction with schools intermittently shut down since the start of the pandemic. As pandemic restrictions are lifted, then reimposed, schools are often the first places to close and the last to reopen.</p> <p>Mahesh Davar, a farmhand in central India, is pained to see his young sons working beside him. He and his wife toiled in the fields to send their boys, now 12 and 14, to school, hoping it would secure them better jobs and easier lives.</p>

Their education effectively ended almost two years ago, when schools shifted online; the family lacked the money for internet access. Around the globe, more than 120 million children have faced the same situation, according to the United Nations.

“Poor people like us fight every day to keep the stove burning,” Mr. Davar said. “Tell me how and where we will afford the money for mobile phones?”

Until the pandemic, India was pulling millions of people out of poverty, pinning its hopes of greater economic growth on education. That building block for the future is now eroding, threatening to upend India’s hard-fought progress and condemn another generation to manual, off-the-books labor.

“In India, the numbers are mind-numbing,” said Poonam Muttreja, head of the Population Foundation, an advocacy group in New Delhi. “Gender and other inequalities are widening, and we’ll have much more of a development deficit in the years to come.”

Many countries are weighing the trade-offs between children’s education and public health. As Omicron has spread across the United States and Europe, officials have struggled to figure out how and when to keep schools open.

In South Asia, Sri Lanka has decided against closing schools, while in Nepal, they are shut until at least the end of January, despite the near impossibility of remote instruction in the Himalayan countryside. Swamped with new infections, Bangladesh reversed an earlier decision to allow vaccinated pupils to attend class, closing schools down for all students.

The repercussions can be especially dire in South Asia. Girls are entering into child marriages, and boys have abandoned their education to work.

The Rev. Nicholas Barla, a Catholic priest who has spent decades working with schools in rural communities, said that during recent travels to remote corners of India, he witnessed children reeling from boredom and isolation.

“The mental growth that should have taken place stopped,” he said. “It is tragic, because education is the only path leading out of darkness and the miseries of rural poverty.”

India’s working-age population is projected to peak at 65 percent in 2031 before it begins to decline. It’s a potential asset that India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, has celebrated, as recently as this month.

“The strength of the youth will take India to greater heights,” he declared at a youth festival.

Typically a large share of the population entering the work force would be an economic boon. Now it could prove a burden, as undereducated and underemployed people in a welfare state like India end up consuming a larger share of resources, from free medicine to food subsidies.

The ranks of the underemployed are already swelling in India’s capital, New Delhi, which draws young people from villages across the country seeking economic opportunity. Many of them sleep on sidewalks, warm themselves next to big pots of boiling chai and stand every morning at a designated pickup place for daily laborers.

In a gritty corner in the old part of the city littered with clay teacups and spent beedis, Briju Kumar jostled with dozens of others hungry for a day’s work at a construction site. At 14, he abandoned online studies during a partial lockdown last year to contribute to the family’s finances.

“If schools open, I’m not sure I will go back. Only if there is no work,” he said.

His family migrated from Bihar, one of India's poorest states, when Briju was in the fifth grade so that his father, who never attended school, could earn more money driving an auto rickshaw. Intermittent lockdowns forced Mr. Kumar off the roads, and his son out of school.

Even before the pandemic, India was failing to keep up with the millions of new workers entering the job market each year, with growth not translating into job creation.

"It's not that we were doing really well on the way to the demographic dividend before Covid," Ms. Muttreja said.

It might be about to get a lot worse. The World Bank estimates that India stands to lose as much as \$440 billion in future earnings potential in the aftermath of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, young workers have been most affected when lockdowns and other economic disruptions occur, facing higher job losses and less financial support, according to a study by the International Labor Organization. In the years ahead, even if a rebound in economic growth creates new jobs, there may not be qualified employees to fill them.

"At the beginning of the pandemic, it was digital, digital, digital, which is fine if you're a more middle-class, urban child," said Terry Durnnian, UNICEF's education chief in India. "But if you're talking about rural children, children with disabilities, migrant children, tribes, they lose out," he said.

"The learning loss is huge," he added. "Children are not getting skills or knowledge to move forward in life."

Remote education has been offered widely in India, but four out of 10 students lack the necessary internet connectivity to attend. And online teaching, particularly in public schools, has been largely available only for older students.

Across India, 1.5 million school closings have affected 247 million children in elementary and secondary schools, according to a UNICEF study. And as the pandemic drags on, more and more students have dropped out. A survey of 650 households in the western Indian cities of Mumbai and Pune found that enrollment in virtual preschools dropped by 40 percent as of last summer compared with before the pandemic.

Rupesh Gaikwad, who works as a grocery store clerk in the western state of Maharashtra, said he enrolled his 5-year-old daughter, Nisha, in preschool two years ago.

"Our daughter has never set foot in the classroom. She thinks the mobile phone is her school, because there has been no real interaction with teachers or other students, apart from seeing them on the mobile phone screen," he said.

"What we are giving our children these days is not education for overall development but trying to keep them busy, knowing very well this is bad for their future."

Even before the pandemic, India's education system was woefully inadequate, with many public schools in rural areas short of teachers and books. Less than half of students possess the reading and math skills to progress to the next grade.

Now, India's spending on education — already far lower than wealthier countries — has been slashed even more. According to the World Bank, government spending on education fell from 4.4 percent of G.D.P. in 2019 to 3.4 percent in 2020.

With schools closed, more children are also going hungry. Many families rely on free school lunches to help meet their children's nutritional needs.

	<p>During India's first two waves of the pandemic, children were largely forgetting more than they learned, UNICEF found. Armed with this data, UNICEF has lobbied state governments, which oversee education, not to close schools.</p> <p>But as Covid-19 infections soared in India, big cities closed schools again last month. Rural India followed suit.</p> <p>Anuradha Maindola, a lawyer in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand, said her two children, Rudra and Ishita, had only spent about a month in physical classrooms since the Indian government's first lockdown in March 2020.</p> <p>She decided to have 8-year-old Ishita, who is struggling to read and write, repeat the first grade.</p> <p>"My children were learning nothing online," she said.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 CDC: 3<sup>rd</sup> shots reduce risk of hospitalization</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/27/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#third-vaccine-dose-immunocompromised">https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/27/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#third-vaccine-dose-immunocompromised</a>
GIST	<p>Third shots of coronavirus vaccines significantly reduced the risk that people with weakened immune systems would be hospitalized with Covid, the <a href="#">Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported on Thursday</a>, reinforcing the case for additional doses in that group.</p> <p>The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines were roughly 88 percent effective against hospitalizations in immunocompromised people who had received a third dose, compared with 69 percent effective in immunocompromised people with only two doses, the agency said.</p> <p>The data came from a study of people treated at 21 American hospitals from August to mid-December, a period when the Delta variant was dominant. But third doses have also been shown to bolster people's defenses against severe outcomes from Omicron, even if the overall protection against that variant is weaker.</p> <p>The latest C.D.C. study also added to the considerable evidence that <a href="#">third doses bolster the defenses of people with stronger immune systems</a>. Three doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines were roughly 97 percent effective in preventing hospitalizations in that group, compared with 82 percent effective among two-dose recipients.</p> <p>But there have been fewer studies on the real-world impact of additional doses in people with weakened immune systems. Those people — the C.D.C. estimates there are about seven million in the country — can be born with faulty immune systems or, in other cases, experience a weakening of their immune defenses because of treatments for diseases like cancer.</p> <p>Many of them produce fewer antibodies in response to a vaccination or an infection, leaving them <a href="#">susceptible to the virus and to higher risks of serious illness</a>.</p> <p>In August, federal regulators authorized a third Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna dose <a href="#">at least four weeks after the second dose</a> for some immunocompromised people. Health authorities considered the additional dose for this group an integral part of their primary immunization series, rather than a booster shot.</p> <p>In October, the C.D.C. said that immunocompromised people <a href="#">could also get a booster shot as soon as early 2022</a> — a fourth dose of vaccine — as a way of enhancing or restoring protection. But some of those people have said that <a href="#">pharmacies or hospitals have refused them the additional doses</a>.</p> <p>For immunocompromised people with a single shot of the Johnson &amp; Johnson vaccine, the C.D.C. advises a booster dose of the Moderna or Pfizer-BioNTech shots.</p>

	The new study evaluated roughly 1,100 adults with weakened immune systems and 1,900 other adults. The C.D.C. said that future studies should look at the protection afforded by additional doses against the Omicron variant in immunocompromised people, as well as the durability of that protection.
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Federal court revokes oil, gas leases</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/climate/federal-court-drilling-gulf.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/climate/federal-court-drilling-gulf.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — A federal judge on Thursday canceled oil and gas leases of more than 80 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico, ruling that the Biden administration did not sufficiently take climate change into account when it auctioned the leases late last year.</p> <p>The <a href="#">decision by the United States District Court for the District of Columbia</a> is a major victory for environmental groups that criticized the Biden administration for holding the sale after promising to move the country away from fossil fuels. It had been the largest lease sale in United States history.</p> <p>Now the Interior Department must conduct a new environmental analysis that accounts for the greenhouse gas emissions that would result from the eventual development and production of the leases. After that, the agency will have to decide whether it will hold a new auction.</p> <p>“This is huge,” said Brettney Hardy, a senior attorney for Earthjustice, one of several environmental groups that brought the lawsuit.</p> <p>“This requires the bureau to go back to the drawing board and actually consider the climate costs before it offers these leases for sale, and that’s really significant,” Ms. Hardy said, adding, “Once these leases are issued, there’s development that’s potentially locked in for decades to come that is going to hurt our global climate.”</p> <p>Melissa Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the Interior Department, said the agency was reviewing the decision.</p> <p>As a candidate, Mr. Biden promised to stop issuing new leases for drilling on public lands and in federal waters. “And by the way, no more drilling on federal lands, period. Period, period, period,” Mr. Biden told voters in New Hampshire in February 2020. Shortly after taking office, he signed an executive order to pause the issuing of new leases.</p> <p>But after Republican attorneys general from 13 states sued, a federal judge in Louisiana blocked that order, and also ruled that the administration must hold lease sales in the Gulf that had already been scheduled.</p> <p>Biden administration officials have said Interior Secretary Deb Haaland risked being held in contempt of court if the auction was not held. Environmental groups, however, argued that the administration had other options, including doing a new analysis to examine the ways that the burning of oil extracted from the Gulf would contribute to climate change.</p> <p>The lawsuit alleged that the Interior Department relied on an outdated environmental analysis conducted by the Trump administration that concluded additional drilling in the Gulf would not increase greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental groups said that analysis did not consider new information about the impact of offshore drilling on rising global temperatures.</p> <p>Scott Lauermann, a spokesman for the American Petroleum Institute, which represents oil and gas companies, said in a statement: “We are reviewing this disappointing decision and considering our options. Offshore energy development plays a critical role in strengthening our nation’s economy and energy security.”</p>

Companies had argued to the court that vacating the lease sale would compromise the confidential bids that were submitted for the tracts, making their competitors aware of who was bidding on what, and for how much.

Shell, BP, Chevron and Exxon Mobil offered \$192 million for the rights to drill in about 1.7 million acres in the area offered by the government. Though the sale occurred on Nov. 17, the leases have not yet been issued.

Judge Rudolph Contreras said in his ruling that the Interior Department “acted arbitrarily and capriciously in excluding foreign consumption from their greenhouse gas emissions” and that it was required to do so under the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, which says the government must consider ecological damage when deciding whether to permit drilling and construction projects.

Any disruptions that revoking the lease sales might cause, he wrote, “do not outweigh the seriousness of the NEPA error in this case and the need for the agency to get it right.”

Emissions from burning fossil fuels produced on federal lands and waters account for about 25 percent of the nation’s greenhouse gas emissions. But despite its bold promises, the Biden administration has moved cautiously over the past year on whether to restrict drilling. With gas prices rising and Republicans eager to blame the administration, environmental activists have accused the administration of sacrificing aggressive action for political expediency.

In November, for example, the Interior department issued a long-awaited report that was supposed to determine the future of federal oil and gas leasing. It skirted the question of ending the practice and instead recommended the government charge companies higher rates to drill.

Oil industry executives said Thursday they are counting on the Biden administration to appeal the court ruling. “At a time of geopolitical uncertainty and rapidly rising energy prices, U.S. oil and gas production is more important than ever to curb inflation and to fortify our national security,” Erik Milito, president of the National Ocean Industries Association, which represents offshore energy companies, said in a statement.

Environmental groups said they want the administration to live up to its campaign promises. “We will continue to hold the Biden administration accountable for making unlawful decisions that contradict its pledge to take swift, urgent action on code red climate and environmental justice priorities,” said Hallie Templeton, legal director at Friends of the Earth, an environmental group that was part of the lawsuit.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 East coast braces for snow again</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/noreaster-snowstorm-weekend-nyc.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/noreaster-snowstorm-weekend-nyc.html</a>
GIST	<p>A sprawling storm system that is forecast to bring winter weather from North Carolina to New England this weekend could have a “significant” impact as it moves up the East Coast, a meteorologist said on Thursday, warning of a storm that could snarl traffic along the Interstate 95 corridor and threaten power outages to millions.</p> <p>Although the storm poses a serious threat to nearly a dozen states, its exact track remained uncertain as of Thursday. “There’s still a lot of inconsistencies in the model runs, especially over the last couple of days, where they’re waffling back and forth,” said Tiffany Fortier, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in New York.</p> <p>The models are showing tracks to the west and east, she said, and their lack of agreement was making this storm “very complex.”</p> <p>The upcoming storm would send another round of heavy snow to much of the East Coast, which already had a lot of snow this month, including a system that <a href="#">stranded hundreds of drivers south of Washington</a>.</p>



“It’s always better to be overprepared than underprepared,” Ms. Fortier said. “Because there is so much uncertainty, the best recommendation is to keep an eye out and just stay updated with your local Weather Service office.”

Here’s a look at what to expect from this weekend’s storm.

### **It’s going to start in the South by Friday evening.**

The storm would probably form east of the Carolinas by Friday evening, [the Weather Service said](#). Light snow could break out across the central Appalachians and Mid-Atlantic by Friday evening before pushing north, where snow accumulations could exceed a foot in some areas. Strong winds and coastal flooding in some areas are also possible, forecasters said. As of early Thursday, a winter storm watch for the weekend stretched from eastern North Carolina up through New England.

### **What’s the forecast for the Mid-Atlantic States?**

A winter storm watch was in effect from Friday evening through Saturday for portions of Maryland, Delaware, far southeastern Pennsylvania and a large swath of New Jersey, [according to the Weather Service](#). Snow accumulations across the region could be as high as nine inches, but the coastal counties of New Jersey could see 12 inches.

Precipitation will begin falling as rain [in central North Carolina](#) before changing over to snow on Friday evening. Several bands of snow were then expected to move across the area before gradually ending on Saturday morning.

In northeast North Carolina, up to four inches of snow [were forecast to pile up](#), starting on Friday, before the storm moves north along the east coast.

Parts of the state have just been emerging from the tail end of a winter storm about a week ago, said the emergency management coordinator in Fayetteville, Scott Bullard.

“It’s not often that these things occur like this,” he said, referring to consecutive winter storms in the South. “Certainly not in serial fashion, or close to each other.”

City departments met on Thursday to prepare, taking a look at their fleet of trucks fitted with brine and plows, and at sports or waste management schedules, he said. While his city of about 210,000 was expected to get but a dusting of snow, the authorities were keeping an eye on the changing models until they get an “ironclad” picture of the forecast, he said.

“We are not really sure what the gusts are going to be like,” Mr. Bullard said.

The storm is expected to churn north from North Carolina into southeast Virginia, where possible accumulations of [up to four inches of snow](#) are possible, the Weather Service said.

[Portions of Virginia](#) and Maryland will start off with rain before transitioning to snow, with some locations expecting to see a foot. Areas around Richmond, Va., could see just a few inches, but it was unclear how much snow would fall in [the Washington, D.C., region](#).

### **The New York forecast is very uncertain.**

Forecasters said there was potential for heavy snow and high winds for eastern portions of the New York City region on Friday through Saturday night, but stressed an [“unusual amount of uncertainty”](#) in snow amounts.

Lee Goldberg, a meteorologist for ABC 7 in New York, projected that eastern Long Island and the southeastern portion of New England had the best chances for blizzard conditions and a foot or more of snow. The New York City region and its surrounding areas could see up to six inches of snow — or as

much as 12 inches depending on the storm's track. Areas north of the city and west were predicted to get a few inches of snow or to see no snow at all.

#### **How will the storm affect New England?**

Across New England, heavy snow and strong winds were predicted, which could bring blizzard conditions, scattered power outages and some damage, the Weather Service said. Coastal flooding and beach erosion were also possible. Portions of Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island were under a winter storm watch from late Friday through Saturday.

"Whiteout conditions could create nearly impossible travel," the Weather Service said.

In southeastern Massachusetts, a foot to 20 inches of snow, starting Friday night, could accumulate, with winds as strong as 65 miles per hour, the Weather Service said. Areas farther west, including Springfield, Mass., and Danbury, Conn., could see lower snow totals.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 FCC revokes China Unicom license in US</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/technology/fcc-china-unicom.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Technology">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/technology/fcc-china-unicom.html?action=click&amp;module=Well&amp;pgtype=Homepage&amp;section=Technology</a>
GIST	<p>The Federal Communications Commission said on Thursday that a state-owned Chinese telecom operator can no longer operate in the United States for national security reasons, as officials in Washington go further to limit the influence of Chinese companies over American consumers, businesses and communications networks.</p> <p>The agency's four commissioners voted unanimously to revoke the license for the American subsidiary of China Unicom, saying the company could access or reroute American communications and engage in spycraft. The commission also accused China Unicom, one of China's largest mobile service providers, of misleading the agency and Congress.</p> <p>China Unicom said in a statement that it "has a good record of complying with relevant laws and regulations and providing telecommunication services and solutions as a reliable partner of its customers in the past two decades." It said the F.C.C. hadn't given it "the required due process" and that it would "proactively protect the rights and interests of the company and its customers."</p> <p>The F.C.C.'s decision comes amid persistent tensions between Washington and Beijing over China's influence in global technology and telecommunications.</p> <p>Lawmakers and regulators have in recent years focused on the potential threats posted by Chinese phone carriers, which serve a small number of customers in the United States. Lawmakers including Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, a Democrat and the current majority leader, <a href="#">said in a 2019 letter</a> that the F.C.C. should review the ability of China Unicom and China Telecom to operate in the United States. The F.C.C. told China Telecom in October that it could no longer offer service in America.</p> <p>The New York Stock Exchange <a href="#">has delisted</a> both companies, along with China Mobile, and President Biden also <a href="#">said last year</a> that Americans could not invest in any of the three companies.</p> <p>The Trump administration also ran a lengthy campaign against the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei, warning allies that they should not use the company's equipment in their next-generation 5G wireless networks and cutting off access to core components for its smartphones.</p> <p>In 2020, the White House unsuccessfully tried to force ByteDance, a Chinese internet company, to sell TikTok, the viral video app, to an American owner, also citing national security reasons. Mr. Trump initially appeared to have forced <a href="#">a deal that would see much of the app sold to the enterprise software company Oracle</a>. The sale was never finalized.</p>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Regional homelessness authority kicks off</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://crosscut.com/politics/2022/01/new-king-county-homelessness-authority-kicks-170m-budget">https://crosscut.com/politics/2022/01/new-king-county-homelessness-authority-kicks-170m-budget</a>
GIST	<p>The new government agency in charge of Seattle and King County's regional homeless response is finally up and running. But the King County Regional Homelessness Authority doesn't plan to simply streamline business as usual. It's bringing a new philosophical and practical approach to homeless service work that will affect everyone from the cities involved to service providers to people on the street. And that change is making some people nervous.</p> <p>But some providers, like Daniel Malone at Seattle's Downtown Emergency Service Center, are taking a wait-and-see attitude.</p> <p>"We have to recognize that this is a big undertaking to launch this new entity and to take on even just the administration of a lot of different funding streams and contracts with providers," said Malone, who is the shelter and housing nonprofit's executive director. "That would be difficult to do in a calmer time. But this is not a calm time, both with the effects of the pandemic really dealing a series of blows, as well as the very dire state of homelessness and amount of suffering that's going on."</p> <p>The King County Regional Homelessness Authority is meant to serve as a single clearinghouse for homeless policy and procedure around King County, rather than having overlapping agencies from each city and county government take their own approach. The authority is tasked with administering and providing oversight of the many contracts Seattle, King County and other cities in the region hold with organizations running shelters, transitional housing, street outreach and more.</p> <p>The job is big. The regional homelessness authority will also serve residents as a single point of contact on homelessness, set the metrics by which the region's homelessness response is measured, make policy decisions and serve as the go-between for the region and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to receive federal funding.</p> <p>Authority CEO Marc Dones' theory of change puts people who've experienced homelessness at the table shaping policy and practices. They want to center racial justice to account for homelessness' stark disproportionality, and attempt to take some of the politics out of the hard, on-the-ground work of helping homeless residents.</p> <p>"There is no end to homelessness without the incorporation of lived experience. ... There is no end to homelessness without a racial justice approach," said Dones. "I respect and understand that in this community, homelessness has been a fight. That's not my style. While we sort of politic around this, people die outside. That's not what I came here to do."</p> <p>On Jan 13, the authority adopted its first, <a href="#">\$170 million annual budget</a>. Just under \$70 million of the authority's funding comes from the city of Seattle and \$50 million from King County to maintain homelessness work already underway.</p> <p>Seattle also passed along almost \$40 million in one-time federal and state COVID-19 relief dollars. That money is being used to expand shelter capacity, expand safe parking options for people living in vehicles, do COVID mitigation work and continue other efforts to ease the pandemic's impacts on the region's homeless residents. About \$11.9 million of the regional authority's budget will be used for administrative costs. In the future, the authority hopes to get financial support from the other 38 cities in King County, as well as private and philanthropic funding.</p> <p>The Seattle city and King County councils each voted to create the regional homelessness authority in December 2019, but it took until April 2021 to hire the authority's first leader, Dones.</p>

Because 2021 was mostly spent staffing up and because the authority joined the city and county budgeting processes when they were already in motion, the 2022 budget is largely just a continuation of the work service providers were already doing.

Giving a taste of the future, Dones had requested \$27 million to target downtown homelessness from the city of Seattle during the council budget process last fall. It would have paid for a [150-bed shelter](#) staffed with medical professionals for people with significant mental health and substance use issues. But the council turned down that request.

“We’re still in a startup year,” said Dones. “It would be destabilizing to attempt [to make significant changes immediately] so we are going to fund everything [at the same level as previous years] that currently exists in order to make sure there is no gap in service.”

Although the entity relies on Seattle and King County for funding, the regional homelessness authority CEO has a lot of autonomy and authority to shape the regional homeless strategy and set the terms of future contracts with nonprofit providers. It’s a level of power sharing that city and county leaders aren’t used to. And there are signs in the budget they are not yet fully comfortable with the idea of handing over the reins on homeless response.

In providing funding for the authority’s budget, Seattle’s mayor and city council used earmarks and a tool called a budget proviso to dictate how the authority can use some of the money. One proviso requires the authority to use \$10.7 million for tiny house village operations. Another reserves \$800,000 of the COVID-19 mitigation funds for services and improvements at YouthCare.

The city also earmarked some funding for specific projects, including \$100,000 to expand the homeless day center at God’s Lil Acre in Lake City and \$980,000 to build an additional 20 tiny houses at Camp Second Chance tiny house village in West Seattle.

The use of provisos along with the fact that Seattle funds about two-thirds of the authority’s budget prompted some concern among the authority’s implementation board, which provides policy and planning recommendations, about the city’s potential outsized influence.

“Are we independent, or do we owe the city something tacit about doing it this way or that way?” said Harold Odom at a Jan. 12 [implementation board meeting](#). Odom is a board member and is a tiny house village resident in Georgetown. “From my point of view as on the ground, we have to not be persuaded by government officials. They’re not out there doing the hard outreach work. Hearing those voices that are so bone chilling when you’re out there and you just can’t get out of your head. Those are the people we need to be uplifting.”

Most of the homeless service providers and advocates Crosscut reached out to for this article declined to be interviewed or provide comment. Those who did respond expressed a mix of optimism about Dones and the new authority, and trepidation about the changes that might come down the line.

“I think Marc is hitting the right notes,” said Downtown Emergency Service Center’s Malone. “They’re not promising things that are not possible to be delivered. And Marc is being clear about the things that are needed that we need to focus on.”

Jon Grant is the chief strategy officer at the Low Income Housing Institute, which operates nine Seattle tiny house villages along with traditional affordable housing. He is excited about the consolidation of contracting and what that means for providers that were often duplicating their contract reporting efforts for the same work when it was funded by multiple entities. But Grant expressed some concern for Dones’ opposition to tiny house village expansion. Seattle has a goal of doubling the number of tiny house villages.

“It’s unclear to us why there has been some criticism of tiny houses,” said Grant. “They are very successful and desired by people who have been chronically homeless. About 50% of people in tiny houses secure

permanent housing, where the typical mat-on-a-floor congregate shelter model has a 3% success rate of finding housing.”

Dones has highlighted several priorities for transforming the regional homelessness infrastructure. For one, Dones wants to see a significant pay increase for homeless service providers. [Low pay, along with extremely difficult working conditions](#), has led to significant turnover among shelter staff and outreach workers. That, in turn, has made [it hard to expand the number of shelters](#) Seattle and the region have.

The Seattle City Council included a 5.8% cost of living adjustment for service providers in the authority's budget. “I’m grateful for a one-time investment,” said Dones. “We need to figure out how to annualize it and figure out how to go beyond. When we look at the level of investment to raise wages in this sector to where teachers or law enforcement are, we are talking tens of millions if not hundreds of millions.”

Dones also wants to see far more people who have experienced homelessness taking prominent roles in outreach, homeless policy creation and other roles in the homeless response infrastructure. Both the authority’s implementation board and governing board include people who have been or are currently homeless. Similarly, Dones said, their work will center racial justice. The majority of people experiencing homelessness are people of color, both locally and nationally. “The disproportionality in Native and Black communities is wild and has been for years.”

When it comes to shelter and housing, Dones wants to continue moving toward using more “noncongregate” shelters that provide people more privacy and security than the traditional mat-on-floor style mass shelters. They also want to invest in more “high acuity” shelters staffed with clinical professionals to help people with the highest, most complicated needs and build more affordable housing with in-house services, such as career counseling, health care and more.

All of that will cost a lot more than the \$170 million a year the authority is currently getting. “I’ve been super clear from the jump that we’re not spending enough money,” said Dones. “I did some napkin math that pencils out that our budget provides about \$3,000 a year per person. Or if you divide it by days it turns into a little over \$10 a day. That’s not enough money.”

Dones’ final message, as the regional homelessness authority really gets underway, is that there will be no easy fix for the region’s homelessness crisis, which is said to have been 30 years in the making.

“There’s no reaching 2024 and, yay, everything’s fixed. I believe our community has the capacity to carry the long-haul work at a political level, narrative level and level of doing the work,” Dones said. “But we have to be really clear-eyed. ... It’s about the economics of homelessness, the disproportionately, the root causes. It’s about being honest about what we can or cannot do at any given moment.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Seattle rental market no signs of cooling</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattlepi.com/local/seattlenews/article/Seattle-rental-market-shows-no-signs-of-cooling-16807084.php">https://www.seattlepi.com/local/seattlenews/article/Seattle-rental-market-shows-no-signs-of-cooling-16807084.php</a>
GIST	<p><a href="#">Seattle’s</a> rental market stayed red-hot through most of last year, and <a href="#">a new report from Zumper</a> — an online rental platform — suggests rent prices in the area show no signs of cooling so far this year.</p> <p>Seattle managed to stay out of the report’s top-10 U.S. cities where rent is most expensive — it landed at spot No. 13 — but its individual figures are still eye-popping.</p> <p>The report says the average rent prices for one-and two-bedroom apartments in Seattle are currently \$1,820 and \$2,570 per month, respectively. Both figures represent a roughly 5% increase over what renters paid on average during December.</p> <p>That isn’t unusual by Seattle standards. But by looking at what the average renter paid during this time last year, you really start to understand how much rent prices increased during 2021.</p>

The current average rent price for a one-bedroom apartment — \$1,820 per month — represents a 16% increase over what one-bedroom renters paid during this time last year, and the current average rent price for a two-bedroom — \$2,570 per month — represents a 25% increase over what two-bedroom renters paid during this time last year.

To put those figures into perspective, one bedroom renters were paying about \$1,517 per month in January 2021, while two-bedroom renters were paying roughly \$1,917 per month.

Zumper analysts [offer two relatively simple reasons](#) for the spike in rent prices over the last year.

First, people in urban areas migrated to the suburbs once the pandemic began. That drove rent prices down. Second, once COVID-19 vaccines became widely available at the start of last year, pandemic restrictions began to lift. That drew people back into urban areas, which pushed rent prices back up.

This is especially evident in places like New York City and Boston, which secured the first and third spots, respectively, on the report's list of 100 cities where rent is the most expensive.

In New York City, the average rent price for a one-bedroom is now 25% more expensive than it was at this time last year. Two-bedroom renters are paying 27% more now than they were at this time last year.

In Boston, the average price for one-bedrooms increased 26.5% over the last year. The price for two-bedrooms increased by 26%.

It's still unclear what the long-term outlook for Seattle's rental market is. But after regular month-over-month increases in rent during 2021 — which translated to a pretty steep year-over-year increase — it's safe to say rent will remain expensive for the foreseeable future.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 WSP cuts psychologist in hiring decisions</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/washington-state-patrol-drops-psychologist-as-legislature-weighs-more-oversight-funding-for-diversity/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/washington-state-patrol-drops-psychologist-as-legislature-weighs-more-oversight-funding-for-diversity/</a>
GIST	<p>The Washington State Patrol permanently stripped its staff psychologist of his power to approve or reject trooper candidates, a role that for nearly 30 years shaped the agency's ranks.</p> <p>Under criticism for a lack of progress to diversify the force, WSP Chief John Batiste recently made the long-term shift to an outside contractor for psychological evaluations of candidates.</p> <p>Lawmakers, frustrated at the lack of progress, are considering legislation, released last week, that would step up oversight of the WSP's diversity efforts. Today, 86% of troopers are white, a number that has barely budged in two decades even as the state has become more diverse.</p> <p>In early November, the WSP temporarily removed its longtime staff psychologist, Daniel Clark, from the evaluations following <a href="#">an investigation</a> by The Seattle Times and public radio Northwest News Network. The reporting revealed the psychological exam administered by Clark disproportionately rejected candidates of color in recent years, and that people inside and outside the department had repeatedly warned about his process.</p> <p>At the time, Clark told the news organizations he didn't believe there was bias in his approach. Earlier this week he forwarded a request for comment to a WSP spokesperson.</p> <p>WSP leaders were <a href="#">planning to audit</a> the psychological exam process before deciding on Clark's future role, but the chief "decided it was time for a clean break," spokesperson Chris Loftis said in a statement Wednesday. Clark will remain on staff, with a focus on employee wellness and counseling staff following critical incidents.</p>



“There are no ‘light-switch’ solutions that quickly bring significant improvement” to the agency’s lack of diversity and concurrent problem of high trooper vacancies, Loftis said. The WSP is looking to build “long-term trust, and increase the allure of law enforcement as a career — over time — in all communities.”

Democratic state Sen. John Lovick, a retired WSP sergeant, welcomed the news that the agency outsourced its psychological evaluations.

“I think it’s certainly a step in the right direction,” said Lovick, D-Mill Creek.

Another critic of WSP’s hiring practices, state Sen. Kevin Van De Wege, D-Sequim, said in a statement, “It’s reassuring to see the State Patrol abandon what has clearly been a failed practice, I just wish it had happened sooner.”

The latest version of a bill introduced by Rep. Javier Valdez, D-Seattle, would require the WSP to work with the newly created state Office of Equity and an independent expert to help the agency achieve its diversity, equity and inclusion goals.

“They need to do better and that’s what I’m proposing here,” Valdez said at a recent hearing.

The legislation would require the WSP to set diversity targets and report progress biannually to the governor and the Legislature. The bill would also create “accountability procedures” such as performance reviews. It includes nearly \$1 million of funding to advance the diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, including a portion for an outside psychologist.

Valdez’s proposal has the support of both WSP brass and the troopers union.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Sound Transit ‘financially unstable’ path</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/with-fares-depressed-sound-transit-grapples-with-financially-unsustainable-trajectory/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/with-fares-depressed-sound-transit-grapples-with-financially-unsustainable-trajectory/</a>
GIST	<p>Revenue from fares on Sound Transit buses and trains have cratered in recent years as operating costs climb, creating a “financially unsustainable” trajectory for the regional transit agency, CEO Peter Rogoff told board members Thursday.</p> <p>Depressed ridership because of COVID-19 underpins much of the drop in revenue. But Rogoff also blamed an increase in passengers who ride without paying, which comes as Sound Transit’s enforcement presence is significantly scaled back.</p> <p>“When you’ve got a situation with a 98% chance of being out on the system and not being contacted by anybody to have any conversation, that just lends itself to further noncompliance,” he said. “We need to get back to a place where our passengers are honoring the honor system that we’re using.”</p> <p>Rogoff’s warnings come as Sound Transit works to revamp its approach to fare enforcement, which was shown to disproportionately land on people of color. The agency previously employed security guards to check that riders had paid before boarding, but is currently testing the use of “fare ambassadors” instead. The ambassadors are not issuing citations for noncompliance, but instead are offering educational materials.</p> <p>Some advocates have pushed Sound Transit to focus more on transit access over fare enforcement. But fare collection is a cornerstone of the agency’s long-term financial plan and recent negative trends necessitate action, Rogoff said.</p> <p>The board, made up of elected and appointed leaders from across the region, will soon decide how it wants to proceed on fare enforcement.</p>

From 2019 to 2020, revenue from fares dropped from \$96 million to just \$30 million as ridership dried up during shutdowns. Where revenue covered 32% of Link light rail's operating cost in 2019, it made up 8% in 2020. When all is accounted for, Sound Transit staff forecasts that just 5% of light rail's operating costs will have been covered by fare revenue in 2021. The agency's board had previously set a goal of 40%, which it has only met once, in 2017.

In November 2021, ridership across all Sound Transit modes was just over 2 million people, compared to around 4 million before the pandemic.

Fare revenue from employer-provided ORCA cards was also down, from \$48 million in 2019 to \$13 million in 2021.

Sound Transit briefly suspended all fares in April and May 2020, as the state went into widespread lockdown. Fares went back into effect in June, but enforcement has not. The ambassador program launched in September of last year.

Rogoff, who is leaving the agency this spring, presented the board with data showing a jump in "fare evasion" from 3% in 2018-19 to between 10% and 30% in 2020-21, based on information collected by fare enforcement officers or ambassadors as they ask riders for proof of payment. As many as 40% to 70% of riders were "nonfare" passengers — which includes riders in 2020-21 who were exempt from fares for various reasons, such as age, as opposed to 14% in 2018-19.

The steep declines come as overall costs are projected to increase with an expanded light-rail network by as much as \$3 billion through 2046.

The conversation around fare collection is unfolding as Sound Transit and its board grapple with the inequities in its enforcement and, separately, as the state Supreme Court prepares next month to hear arguments over [whether it's legal to ask passengers on all kinds of transit for proof of payment](#).

Data from 2015-19 showed that Black riders were [disproportionately cited and punished for fare evasion](#), especially as the issue escalated into the court system. Fifty-seven percent of misdemeanors for fare evasion were issued to Black riders, who make up just 9% of riders.

Sound Transit's board is still considering how it would like to reform the system of enforcement. On Thursday, Sound Transit leadership offered several recommendations.

One change would increase the number of warnings — from one to four — issued to passengers before they're given a citation for \$124. The third and fourth warnings would come with "administrative fines" of \$50 and then \$75 that could be satisfied through loading that money onto an ORCA card. Sound Transit would retain the right to refer infractions to court, but only after the fifth time.

At the same time, Sound Transit leadership recommended reducing the cost of youth and subsidized fares to \$1 from \$1.50, an effort to increase how often passengers are tapping their cards before boarding. Leadership also recommended expanding access to ORCA LIFT cards that allow low-income riders to pay a reduced fare.

"We have work to do to figure out what are the best ways to get to have a successful marketing campaign to get eligible riders signed up," acknowledged Rogoff.

Board members did not give an immediate timeline for when they would take action on a new fare enforcement system.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/free-n95-masks-coming-to-wa-pharmacies-and-grocery-stores/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/free-n95-masks-coming-to-wa-pharmacies-and-grocery-stores/</a>
GIST	<p>Free N95 masks will soon be available at multiple pharmacies and grocery stores in Washington, with some locations already offering masks as early as Thursday.</p> <p>The free masks are part of a federal effort to give away <a href="#">400 million N95 masks</a> through pharmacies and community health centers that have partnered with the federal government's vaccination campaign.</p> <p>In Washington, partners include Albertsons, Bartell Drugs, Costco, CVS, Fred Meyer, Rite Aid, Safeway, Walgreens and Walmart, among others. A full list of partners can be found on the <a href="#">Centers for Disease Control and Prevention site, st.news/masking</a>.</p> <p>Local pharmacies should start receiving the masks "in the coming days," <a href="#">the state Department of Health</a> said Thursday.</p> <p>Monica Prinzing, spokesperson for CVS' Western region, said some locations started giving away masks Thursday. Masks will arrive at more CVS pharmacies, including locations inside Target, and will continue to arrive on a rolling basis, she said.</p> <p>Masks will be limited to three per person, while supplies last, and signs will be posted to indicate mask availability, according to Prinzing.</p> <p>Bartell Drugs will also limit customers to three masks each. Though a spokesperson was not able to provide a specific timeline Thursday for when masks will be available to pick up, the regional drugstore chain anticipates some locations will receive masks this week, and all stores by early February.</p> <p>The CDC clarified its recommendation on <a href="#">face coverings in January</a> and said that properly fitted N95 and KN95 masks offer the most protection.</p> <p>Washington state plans to distribute around <a href="#">10 million masks, including KN95 and surgical masks</a>, mostly from existing supplies. State officials had said earlier this month that those masks will be sent to local emergency management officials and K-12 schools "in the coming weeks."</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 KCSO: 3 of 5 escaped teens caught</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/1-of-5-teens-who-escaped-from-juvenile-facility-near-snoqualmie-caught/">https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/1-of-5-teens-who-escaped-from-juvenile-facility-near-snoqualmie-caught/</a>
GIST	<p>Three of the five incarcerated teenagers who <a href="#">escaped from the Echo Glen Children's Center near Snoqualmie on Wednesday morning</a> were arrested hours apart on Thursday, with two of the teens arrested on Kent's East Hill and the third in Kirkland, according to the King County Sheriff's Office.</p> <p>After the Sheriff's Office posted the name and photograph of a 15-year-old Burien boy on Twitter on Wednesday evening, tips led detectives to a Chevron gas station and McDonald's restaurant in the 10700 block of South 240th Street, in Kent, said Sgt. Tim Meyer. The boy, who <a href="#">shot and killed a stranger two years ago</a>, was arrested without incident at 1:30 a.m. on an escape warrant with help from uniformed Kent police officers, he said.</p> <p>The teen is now in custody at the King County Child and Family Justice Center in Seattle. He is expected to make his first court appearance related to his escape on Friday.</p> <p>The Seattle Times typically does not name juveniles accused or convicted of crimes unless they are prosecuted in adult court.</p> <p>Around 3:15 p.m. Thursday, Kent police arrested one of the teenagers, but details about his apprehension were not immediately made available. The third teen was taken into custody just before 5 p.m. in Kirkland.</p>

	<p>As with the arrest of the 15-year-old, both arrests came about as a result of tips from the community.</p> <p>Two teenagers and a state-owned 2018 gray Ford Fusion were still missing as of 6:30 p.m. Thursday, according to the Sheriff's Office. Anyone with information about their whereabouts is asked to call 911.</p> <p>The five boys, ages 14 to 17, serving sentences for various felonies, attacked staff members and escaped from Echo Glen around 7:45 a.m. Wednesday in the Ford Fusion, a state pool vehicle. Two of them had escaped before, Meyer said.</p> <p>Aside from the five teens who fled Echo Glen this week, nearly two dozen people have escaped from the rehabilitation center since 2012, with at least one escape occurring each year during that span, according to a spokesperson for the state agency that oversees the facility.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Economic expansion biggest since 1984</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/business/us-gdp-4q-2021.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/business/us-gdp-4q-2021.html</a>
GIST	<p>Continuing to rebound from the shocks of the pandemic, the nation's economy expanded by 1.7 percent in the final three months of 2021, the Commerce Department announced Thursday.</p> <p>The figure, which was adjusted for inflation, reflects the growth in gross domestic product — the broadest measure of the goods and services produced. On an annualized basis, the increase for the quarter was 6.9 percent.</p> <p>For the full year, the economic expansion was 5.7 percent, the biggest since 1984 — an impressive feat, though one that also reflects the depth of the damage inflicted by the coronavirus the year before.</p> <p>The fourth quarter was, to some extent, a respite between coronavirus waves. It began as the Delta variant was easing, and the impact of Omicron began to be felt only in the final weeks. Economists expect Omicron to be a drag on the economy in January and much of February. But they say activity should normalize as the variant fades and spring approaches.</p> <p>The strong fourth-quarter growth was driven in part by consumer spending, which “primarily reflected an increase in services, led by health care, recreation and transportation,” the Commerce Department said. Private investment and an increase in inventories were also major factors.</p> <p>“This is really strong data,” said Jane Oates, an assistant labor secretary during the Obama administration and the president of Working Nation, a nonprofit group focused on employment issues. The inventory increase, she said, “shows at least incremental improvement in supply chains.”</p> <p>Consumer spending and private investment were revived after the pandemic's initial blow as a result of vaccination efforts, cheap credit conditions and additional rounds of federal aid to households and businesses. The labor market has <a href="#">recovered almost 19 million of the 22 million jobs</a> lost near the peak of virus-induced suspensions in activity.</p> <p>The initial momentum provided by government stimulus and the post-vaccine resurgence in many sectors is projected to fade further, and the <a href="#">Federal Reserve is planning to use its policy tools</a> in the coming months to rein in <a href="#">inflation</a>, which in December hit its highest level in 40 years.</p> <p>“Fiscal and monetary policy committed to supporting the economy aggressively during the pandemic, and it worked,” said Julia Coronado, a former Federal Reserve economist and a professor of finance at the University of Texas at Austin. “Not only did we meet the goal of shortening the recession,” she said, “we exceeded all expectations” on the speed of re-employment.</p> <p>As recently as last February, the Congressional Budget Office <a href="#">predicted</a> that it might take until 2024 to reach the current unemployment rate of 3.9 percent, down from a peak of 14.7 percent in April 2020.</p>

President Biden hailed the year's economic growth and job gains as evidence that his policies were yielding substantial fruit. "The G.D.P. numbers for my first year show that we are finally building an American economy for the 21st century," he said in a statement on Thursday.

But the economic recovery has been overshadowed recently by the highest rates in inflation since 1982. Consumer price increases — which reached [7 percent in the year through December](#) — began to intensify in the spring when demand overstressed supply networks already discombobulated by the pandemic.

Import prices, for instance, [were 10.4 percent higher in December](#) than a year earlier, according to the Labor Department. Many businesses, large and small, are preparing for such supply chain issues to stretch beyond the summer — an unwelcome sign for workers whose wages have grown at the fastest pace in decades, while their purchasing power as consumers has been dented by costlier goods.

A [Gallup survey conducted this month](#) found that Americans view the economy more negatively than positively — with only 29 percent saying that the economy is improving, while 67 percent believe it is getting worse.

Still, 72 percent say it is a good time to find a quality job.

"It's all about what you prioritize," said Allison Schrager, an economist and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank. Policymakers in Washington decided to err on the side of delivering too much pandemic aid rather than too little — and Ms. Schrager is among the analysts who say the trade-offs of that decision are becoming evident. If there had been less stimulus, she said, "inflation wouldn't be as bad as it is."

At a news conference on Wednesday, Jerome H. Powell, the Fed chair, conceded that "bottlenecks and supply constraints are limiting how quickly production can respond to higher demand in the near term" and that "these problems have been larger and longer lasting than anticipated."

As analysts mull the direction and degree of price increases this year, many see the spring months as a crucial pivot point, said Ellen Zentner, a managing director and the chief U.S. economist at Morgan Stanley. This is partly because the Consumer Price Index reports in March and April of this year will provide the first relatively stable year-over-year comparisons that experts will have seen in three years: 2020 data was juxtaposed with the prepandemic normal of 2019; reports in 2021 after the economy reopened were measured against the abnormal, partly depressed environment of the vaccine-less economy in 2020.

"The hope is that changes as we're getting into the second quarter," Ms. Zentner said. And that high-single-digit inflation "doesn't drag on further into the year."

During quarterly earnings calls, JPMorgan Chase and Bank of America, which serve a combined 140 million households, have reported that families' finances are technically better off than before the pandemic. Bank of America said its customers [spent a record \\$3.8 trillion in 2021, a 24 percent jump from 2019 levels](#). But analysts note that dwindling savings and continuing price increases — along with any new coronavirus variants — could curb consumption.

The report on Thursday indicated that the cash reserves many Americans were able to build up during the pandemic continued to dwindle: Real disposable personal income decreased by 5.8 percent in the fourth quarter, and the personal saving rate — the percentage of overall disposable income that goes into savings each month — was 7.4 percent, compared with 9.5 percent in the third quarter.

Although [factory production was up 3.5 percent](#) in December from a year earlier, manufacturing output fell by 0.3 percent last month, a weaker showing than most forecasts. The spread of the Omicron variant appears to be extending manufacturers' struggles with finding consistent labor, as infections drive absences. With businesses outbidding one another to get to the front of the line for supply parts that make

	<p>up their finished products, materials shortages for hard-to-source components, such as computer chips, also remain a headache.</p> <p>The International Monetary Fund, citing tighter Fed policy and an anticipated halt to any further stimulus spending by Congress, this week <a href="#">reduced its U.S. growth forecast for 2022</a> by 1.2 percentage points, to 4 percent — though that increase would still outpace the annual average from 2010 to 2019.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Covid cases inside Beijing Olympic bubble</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/asia/covid-case-beijing-olympics-germany.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/asia/covid-case-beijing-olympics-germany.html</a>
GIST	<p>A supervisor in Germany's Olympic delegation has tested positive for the coronavirus within the <a href="#">closed loop</a> in Beijing, the German Olympic Sports Confederation said on Thursday, confirming one of the first cases connected to an athletic team within the bubblelike environment meant to shield participants from the rest of the world.</p> <p>The positive case was identified on Sunday after a P.C.R. test administered in Zhangjiakou, where many of the snow events will take place about 100 miles northwest of Beijing, the confederation said. The supervisor is asymptomatic and is currently in a quarantine hotel, it said.</p> <p>Beijing officials said on Thursday that <a href="#">eight new cases</a> had been detected in the bubble as of the previous day. Fifteen others were found among airport arrivals of Games-related personnel. None were linked to an athlete or a team official.</p> <p>Since Jan. 4, 50 cases have been identified in the closed loop, according to official data. Officials have linked one of them to an athlete or team official. Among airport arrivals, 79 cases have been detected, data show. One was an athlete or team official, and the rest were other stakeholders, officials said.</p> <p>Some athletes, including those from the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary and Norway, have received positive tests before departing for the Olympics, resulting in delayed travel and throwing into question their chance of competing in the Games.</p> <p>Josh Williamson, an athlete of the Team USA bobsled team, said <a href="#">on Instagram</a> on Wednesday that he had tested positive for the coronavirus on Sunday and would not board the rest of the delegation's flight to Beijing on Thursday.</p> <p>One athlete, the Russian figure skater <a href="#">Mikhail Kolyada</a>, was withdrawn from his team after testing positive, the Olympics committee said on Tuesday.</p> <p>The Games are scheduled to start on Feb. 4.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Vast troves classified info harms security</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/vast-troves-of-classified-info-undermine-national-security-spy-chief-says-11643286602?mod=hp_lead_pos4">https://www.wsj.com/articles/vast-troves-of-classified-info-undermine-national-security-spy-chief-says-11643286602?mod=hp_lead_pos4</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—The U.S. intelligence community's approach to classifying vast amounts of information is so flawed that it harms national security and diminishes public trust in government, according to Avril Haines, President Biden's director of national intelligence.</p> <p>The acknowledgment of such concerns about how the nation's spy agencies choose what information to keep secret under various classification levels is among the most significant by a president's sitting intelligence chief, government transparency advocates said, and could indicate broader interest in the Biden administration for loosening restrictive access to some of the government's growing collection of secrets.</p>



“It is my view that deficiencies in the current classification system undermine our national security, as well as critical democratic objectives, by impeding our ability to share information in a timely manner” with allies, policy makers and the public, Ms. Haines wrote in a letter earlier this month to Sens. Ron Wyden (D., Ore.) and Jerry Moran (R., Kan.), which was reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

The letter was in response to an October request for information from the senators, who have pushed for overhauls of the declassification system to assist federal agencies struggling to process a large volume of secret information that is no longer sensitive, such as backlogged historical records Congress has said must be released. Messrs. Wyden and Moran have said classification costs taxpayers about \$18.5 billion annually.

It is not publicly known how much information is classified by the government, but watchdogs and open-government activists believe such a trove is likely to include billions of records and is rapidly expanding, in part because of the explosion of digital communications.

Such secrecy, Ms. Haines wrote, “reduces the intelligence community’s (IC) capacity to effectively support senior policy maker decision-making, and further erodes the basic trust that our citizens have in their government. It is a fundamentally important issue that we must address.”

Despite numerous reviews looking at problems with classification, Ms. Haines said current efforts to address the exponential growth of classified material “are simply not sufficient.”

Government transparency advocates have argued for decades that the classification regime among intelligence agencies is overly restrictive and prevents the public from knowing what the U.S. government is doing on a range of security issues, such as drone strikes in foreign countries, surveillance practices at home and abroad, and offensive cyber operations.

Often unflattering information—such as civilian deaths from drone strikes—only comes to light after Freedom of Information lawsuits from media organizations, or if an official risks years of jail time by leaking classified material. U.S. national security officials, while acknowledging some shortcomings, have historically defended expansive classification practices as necessary to their core intelligence collection missions.

“Some of the most consequential decisions our government makes are related to national security,” said Alex Abdo, a lawyer with the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, which advocates for more government transparency.

Ms. Haines, 52 years old, is the first woman director of national intelligence, a job that oversees 18 intelligence agencies and units, including the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, which employ hundreds of thousands of federal workers and contractors.

She has previously expressed concerns about the classification system in intelligence agencies, but never before as starkly or substantively. In a book chapter published last year, but written before she became the nation’s intelligence chief, Ms. Haines identified overclassification as a problem in part because “it actually encourages leaking.”

In her letter, Ms. Haines included two declassified efforts under way at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and the Department of State to address the intelligence community’s classification issues, both of which involve efforts to modernize and digitize records to make them easier to search and identify in order to more quickly release material to the public.

“Director Haines clearly recognizes that the current broken classification system harms U.S. national security while eroding the public’s trust in government,” Messrs. Wyden and Moran said in a joint statement. The senators said Ms. Haines had offered to work with them on overhauls, and that they had asked her to coordinate with the White House on potential updates to the presidential executive orders governing the classification system.

An aide to Mr. Wyden said additional examples of efforts to improve declassification work included in Ms. Haines's letter were shared with Messrs. Wyden and Moran but marked "for official use only," a government designation assigned to documents that, while not technically a classification level, limits the public's access to them.

A senior intelligence official said those examples were downgraded to that level to enable wider circulation in Congress, but because they include information about pending budgetary decisions, they couldn't be made public.

Ongoing declassification review efforts are focused on identifying topics that hold significant public interest, the intelligence official said.

About four million people have some level of security clearance in the U.S., including about one million contractors, according to recent federal estimates. The number has fluctuated but drawn bipartisan scrutiny in Congress for years amid worries of insider threats—employees who steal classified national security information and disclose it to a foreign power or to the public.

Mr. Abdo said the Biden administration had taken encouraging steps over the past year to be more transparent, including the declassification of an intelligence report on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi—which had been written during the Trump administration but never released—and the decision by Mr. Biden not to assert executive privilege over documents from the Trump White House related to the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. But Mr. Abdo said he was still skeptical about the Biden administration's overall commitment to overhauling the classification regime.

"People lose their jobs or get prosecuted if they release information that they shouldn't, but they face no consequences for failing to disclose something the public needs to know," Mr. Abdo said.  
"Unsurprisingly, that has bred a culture of secrecy in government."

Battles over classification have recently centered on former officials attempting to publish books about their time in government that are subjected to a process known as pre-publication review. Typically, government employees and contractors with access to classified information must submit any published works—even works of fiction—to their agency for reviews.

Some former Trump administration officials have sought to publish books about their encounters with the former president, including former Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who sued the Pentagon in November for redacting portions of his manuscript.

Lawyers in a separate case—including Mr. Abdo of the Knight First Amendment Institute—that involves several former intelligence officials who have sought to publish writings on their government service have appealed to the Supreme Court after losing in lower courts. Their lawsuit argues that the pre-publication review is overly restrictive and violates freedom-of-speech protections. The government has countered that the reviews don't violate the First Amendment and are necessary to protect national security.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Covid curbs eased further in Europe
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-curbs-eased-further-in-europe-as-new-version-of-omicron-spreads-in-places-11643286710?cx_testId=3&amp;cx_testVariant=cx_2&amp;cx_artPos=4&amp;mod=WTRN#cxrecs_s">https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-curbs-eased-further-in-europe-as-new-version-of-omicron-spreads-in-places-11643286710?cx_testId=3&amp;cx_testVariant=cx_2&amp;cx_artPos=4&amp;mod=WTRN#cxrecs_s</a>
GIST	<p>Several European countries have lifted or relaxed Covid-19 restrictions, citing the <a href="#">milder symptoms being caused by the Omicron variant in vaccinated people</a>—even as daily infections continued to surge in some countries and a new version of Omicron was identified as spreading in places.</p> <p>In the U.S., the number of recorded cases and the number of patients with Covid-19 in hospitals slipped further, while the number of <a href="#">recorded Covid-19 deaths rose</a> to its highest since early last year. The daily</p>

average of Covid-19 deaths recorded over the seven days to Wednesday was 2,301, the highest figure since February.

Denmark announced it would lift most mandatory restrictions on Feb. 1. Premier Mette Frederiksen told journalists Wednesday that measures ranging from mask mandates, to mandatory vaccinations for access to some public spaces and shortened opening times for some businesses would all end, with only some traveling restrictions remaining in place until the end of February.

The decision comes as a subvariant of Omicron—known as BA.2—appeared to be gaining ground in Denmark. The version is under observation in several countries, including the U.K. and India, and has been identified in about 40 countries world-wide, including the U.S. There are signs that BA.2 may be gaining ground in Denmark over the original Omicron strain, known as BA.1, but there is no evidence that it causes more serious disease, scientists say.

Austria also said Wednesday it would end its lockdown for unvaccinated residents on Monday. Some restrictions, including mask mandates, will remain and while unvaccinated people will be allowed to leave their homes, they will still be barred from most of public life. Austria is the first European country to mandate [Covid-19 vaccinations for everyone older than 18](#).

In the Netherlands, which had one of Europe's strictest lockdowns in the Omicron wave, cafes and restaurants have been allowed to reopen in the evening since Wednesday. The Swedish government said this week current restrictions would continue for now but could be lifted on Feb. 9, and France has announced limited relaxations of its strict anti-Covid-19 measures.

In England, almost all remaining Covid-19 restrictions were lifted on Thursday. Face coverings will no longer be required for indoor venues, but shops and transport companies may continue to require them. A legal requirement for people with Covid-19 to self isolate for at least five days remains in place.

This gradual normalization, whose extent still varies greatly from country to country, is taking place even though Covid-19 infections show little sign of decelerating on the continent.

Unlike [in the U.K.](#) and the U.S., new cases continue to rise fast across most of Europe. Cases in Denmark, one of the first countries on the continent to be hit hard by Omicron had almost four times as many daily new cases per million inhabitant this week as the U.S., according to Oxford University's Our World in Data.

At the same time, the number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care has been falling steadily across the region—and often faster since mid-January—while the number of infected patients in hospitals is rising only slowly.

France reported 428,008 new Covid-19 cases in the 24 hours to Wednesday evening, as the seven-day average number of new cases in the country continues to rise. The number of people in hospital grew to more than 30,000, approaching the peaks of 2020 and 2021. The number of people in intensive care, however, has been falling in the past week and remains far below the peaks of the past two years.

The French vaccine strategy council has advised the French government that giving people a fourth Covid-19 vaccine dose isn't justified at this stage. "The data available at the moment does not call for a second booster dose," the body said in a note dated Jan. 19 but published on Wednesday.

Italy's health ministry on Wednesday reported over 167,000 new cases of Covid in the previous 24 hours, a drop of 10% from the previous day, and 13% less than recorded a week earlier. Italy's emergency Covid commissioner, Gen. Francesco Paolo Figliuolo, said earlier this week that the wave of infections with the Omicron variant in the country had plateaued.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-standoff-prompts-europe-to-enlist-u-s-help-securing-gas-11643294410?mod=hp_lead_pos10">https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-standoff-prompts-europe-to-enlist-u-s-help-securing-gas-11643294410?mod=hp_lead_pos10</a>
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS—European officials are scrambling to lock down energy supplies they would need to keep their economies churning if <a href="#">hostilities around Ukraine</a> imperil natural gas piped from Russia, and have turned to the U.S. for help finding backup sources beyond Moscow’s control.</p> <p>In recent weeks, as Russia has positioned <a href="#">more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine</a>, European Union energy officials have huddled with U.S. counterparts and are jetting to gas producers including Azerbaijan and Qatar to hunt for fallback sources.</p> <p>European search efforts began in the fall, when the global economic rebound from the Covid-19 pandemic sent gas and electricity prices skyrocketing. The efforts intensified in recent weeks, as Moscow’s escalation with Kyiv left European governments contemplating a once-unthinkable scenario of a conflict <a href="#">interrupting the flows from Russia</a>, which provides about 40% of the 27-country bloc’s natural gas. Few officials expect that to happen and acknowledge that huge volumes of gas from Russia couldn’t be replaced in the foreseeable future. But the prospect is motivating a quest for fallback supplies to cover an economy that can’t otherwise function.</p> <p>Now, U.S. and European officials are racing to find short-term alternatives to refill depleted reserves. More than two-dozen tankers are en route from the U.S. to Europe, lured by high gas prices in the EU. Another 33 tankers that haven’t yet confirmed their destinations are likely to mainly head there as well, according to oil analytics firm Vortexa Inc. “They would only cover a fraction” of Russian supplies if all were lost, said Clay Seigle, managing director at Vortexa.</p> <p>Biden administration officials in recent days have held marathon video calls with officials around the world, trying to convince buyers in South Korea, Japan and other countries that have already paid for their imports to let the U.S. reroute those shipments to Europe, people involved in those talks said. European officials have traveled or planned trips to Doha and the Azeri capital, Baku, to try to line up supply.</p> <p>The efforts, described by officials in the U.S., Europe and the Middle East, are an attempt to weaken what has long been Moscow’s strongest leverage over Europe: The continent’s biggest and easiest source of gas flows from Russia through a network of pipelines that cross Belarus and Ukraine. That gas heats homes, generates electricity and keeps factories running. Countries including Germany and Austria have long resisted diversifying to alternative, more expensive sources of gas outside of Russia.</p> <p>Moscow has consistently dismissed suggestions that it would cut gas exports: “This is yet another brilliant example of fake hysteria,” President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said on Jan. 24.</p> <p>EU and allied officials are trying to find stopgaps at a time of tight supply and steep prices. Russia has, for the most part, declined to sell any gas beyond what its long-term contracts require, frustrating buyers who expected Moscow to be more understanding. Beyond Russia, producers like Qatar say they are maxed out, with most of that country’s exports of liquefied natural gas going to buyers in Asia. Qatar also has its relationship with Moscow to consider, a senior Qatari adviser said.</p> <p>“Politically, we are very keen to help both the United States and Europe, but in reality we cannot just walk away from our long-term commitments to Asia even if it is just for a short period,” said the adviser. “The U.S. and other players in Europe will have to do a lot of convincing here.”</p> <p>While the U.S. and other nations are technically capable of producing more natural gas, they face bottlenecks in how much they can ship overseas. There are a limited number of U.S. LNG export terminals that can turn the gas into a liquid so it can be transported over long distances. U.S. LNG export facilities have been running near capacity for months amid tightening supplies of the fuel around the world, as economies gradually recover from the pandemic and demand roars back.</p>

Not all European governments are as alarmed as Washington and Brussels. German officials said they aren't working on market interventions with the U.S. to secure alternative gas supplies and say the country's supplies are secure.

Many officials in the U.S. and Europe said they doubt Russia would massively cut Europe's supply because that would harm Moscow financially and cement European political will to find other gas sources. Barring a cataclysmic rupture in economic ties, Russia is almost certain to remain Europe's most important gas supplier. Even if gas stopped flowing tomorrow, analysts in Germany think the country could scrape through this winter, by using reserves and rationing gas if necessary.

EU officials, however, say there is no room for complacency. A reduction in Russian gas supplies at a time of high energy prices and inflation would provide another shock to the economy and to consumers who are only now recovering from the pandemic. Europeans are highly sensitive to fuel prices, which are steep compared with the U.S. because of taxes and limited local supplies. France's yellow-vest movement started in 2018 after President Emmanuel Macron announced new fuel taxes that would hit drivers. France, Austria and Hungary are all headed into elections.

The EU's gas reserves are already low, averaging around 42% of capacity, according to Gas Infrastructure Europe, an association of companies in the field. Germany's reserves are even lower. When full, they cover roughly 20% of Europe's annual gas consumption.

"Every few years, when Russia and Ukraine square off, everybody in Europe is uncomfortably reminded just how reliant they are on the overland route of Russian gas," said A. Wess Mitchell, former assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, who spent years trying to convince his European counterparts to diversify their gas supply. "In retrospect, it's pretty remarkable."

After Russia cut gas supplies to Ukraine in 2009, the EU started making its continentwide pipeline network more flexible, allowing gas to flow in multiple directions. But the network still has gaps and relies primarily on supplies from Russia.

Europe has turned to Washington for help orchestrating the complex global diplomacy needed to divert toward Europe huge shipments of LNG already purchased by U.S. allies.

European officials believe they could perhaps double the gas volumes pumped from Azerbaijan through a pipeline crossing through Turkey to southern Europe. That would require installing stronger pumps along the route, work that could be completed quickly if European demand can be locked in. The bloc's energy commissioner, Kadri Simson, will be in Baku at a gas conference on Feb. 4.

Some analysts wonder how long the current fervor for non-Russian gas will last.

"I'm not sure what's real and what's part of the mood that everyone has at the moment," said Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk, director of the power sector program at Warsaw think tank Forum Energii. "How much of this will simply disappear when the prices go down in spring?"

For now, Biden administration officials hope to secure more than 10 billion cubic meters of LNG for Europe, said one person briefed on the plans. Several analysts said that amount of gas, which represents roughly 6% of the gross annual LNG spot market, would be hard to come by.

American exporters, while eager to help, have told U.S. officials during talks that they are already sending as many cargoes as they can to Europe without breaking long-term supply contracts with other customers. Europe is already receiving 70% of America's LNG cargoes, according S&P Global Platts. Further discussions on European supply will take place during an EU-U.S. energy meeting on Feb. 7, European officials say.

Closer to Europe, Algeria recently started pumping more gas to Spain and Norway agreed in September to allow state-controlled company Equinor AS A to supply an additional 2 billion cubic meters for the next

	<p>12 months through increased production in two big gas fields, said a senior EU official. European partners' responses sometimes resulted in different forms of support: exploring additional supply, or delaying planned maintenance work to ensure the increased supply reaches Europe quickly, a senior EU official said.</p> <p>Even if Europe is able to ship in backup LNG supplies, it faces logistical challenges getting the gas around the continent. Spain has many port terminals needed to receive LNG, but few pipeline connections to the rest of Europe. Germany, the continent's largest economy, lacks the port facilities to import LNG and would need to depend on France, Poland or other countries that have built terminals in part to reduce its reliance on Russia.</p> <p>Ultimately, a senior EU official said, a significant reduction in Russian gas supply would have to be met with extraordinary measures on the European side. That could include countries extending the life of nuclear plants and even turning to significantly increase the use of coal, an energy source that emits high levels of carbon dioxide and whose use the EU was hoping to gradually end.</p> <p>"We can only say, 'we told you so,'" said Witold Waszczykowski, a former foreign minister of Poland, where the government expects to become entirely independent of Russian gas imports within the year. "It should have happened earlier."</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Stocks higher after wild ride</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/global-stocks-markets-dow-update-01-27-2022-11643265209?mod=hp_lead_pos2">https://www.wsj.com/articles/global-stocks-markets-dow-update-01-27-2022-11643265209?mod=hp_lead_pos2</a>
GIST	<p>U.S. stocks traded higher as economic growth data came in stronger than expected, and investors parsed more earnings from major companies.</p> <p>The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 571 points, or 1.7%. The S&amp;P 500 added 1.7% and the Nasdaq Composite climbed 1.5%. All 11 of the S&amp;P 500's 11 sectors were recently in the green, with all but the consumer discretionary sector ahead at least 1%.</p> <p>The economy grew at an <a href="#">annualized rate of 6.9%</a> last quarter, the biggest one-year jump since 1984. Economists had forecasted 5.5% growth, propelled by consumer spending, business investment and efforts to rebuild inventories.</p> <p>The Stoxx Europe 600 added 0.6%, reversing direction after declining moderately. Earlier, Asia-Pacific indexes fell sharply, with gauges in China, Japan and South Korea hitting their lowest closing levels in more than a year.</p> <p>Today's moves came after a bout of volatility that saw U.S. indexes swing wildly this week. The VIX hit its highest level in a year on Wednesday. Markets have been buffeted by concerns about central-bank policy around interest rates and inflation, and <a href="#">geopolitical tensions over Russia</a>.</p> <p>Earnings season is ongoing and is seen as the next big test of whether the stock market's sky-high valuations can be justified.</p> <p><a href="#">McDonald's</a> shares were little changed after the company missed analysts' profit estimates, <a href="#">despite a sales boost</a>. Blackstone rose 8% after it reported that <a href="#">net income nearly doubled</a>. <a href="#">Mastercard</a> declined 0.5% after it said operating expenses had jumped.</p> <p>"What I'm looking for this earnings season is inflationary pressures and margins—if companies are able to hold on to their profits," Fahad Kamal, chief investment officer at Kleinwort Hambros, said. "Are they able to pass along prices, are they able to maintain pricing power?" As central banks rein in liquidity, that is what becomes really important, he added.</p>



On Wednesday, the Fed signaled it would begin [raising interest rates](#) in mid-March, its latest step toward removing stimulus to bring down inflation. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said the central bank could continue to lift rates faster than it did during the past decade.

The news shows the central bank “is in a hurry,” said John Vail, chief global strategist at Nikko Asset Management in Tokyo. “The Fed got serious really fast and it’s having an effect on markets.”

The yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note edged down to 1.836% Thursday from 1.845%. Shorter-dated government bonds continued to sell off, with the two-year Treasury yield rising to 1.179%, notching a new pandemic high.

The greenback strengthened, with the WSJ Dollar Index rising to the highest level since July 2020. Precious metals fell, with gold recently down 1.3%.

“The yields in the U.S. have gone up as the path of rate hikes increases. There’s a bit of a safe-haven play mixed in there as well, that will be a support environment for the dollar,” said Mr. Kamal.

[Apple](#), [Visa](#) and food and beverage giant Mondelez are due to report Thursday [after markets close](#).

[Netflix](#) rose 6.1% after billionaire investor William Ackman said his hedge fund had [bought 3.1 million shares](#). Moderna climbed 3.3% after the company said it has started testing a version of its Covid-19 vaccine modified to [target the Omicron variant](#).

[Teradyne](#), an equipment manufacturer, tumbled close to 16% premarket after its profit guidance for missed analysts’ expectations. Records showed that company insiders have sold thousands of shares in recent days. Software firm [ServiceNow](#) rose nearly 11% after beating Wall Street’s estimates on revenue.

[Weekly jobless claims were 260,000](#), a decline from the previous week. Analysts were expecting a drop amid a tight labor market. Orders for durable goods in December slipped 0.9%.

Oil prices edged up. Brent, the global benchmark for crude, climbed 1.1% to trade at \$89.72 and hit a fresh seven-year high. Declining inventories have been pushing up prices, according to Nordic bank SEB.

Cryptocurrencies edged up, with bitcoin extending its decline into a third day to trade around \$36,500. [Meta Platforms](#), formerly known as Facebook, is winding down its plans to build a cryptocurrency payments network and is selling its technology to a small bank, [The Wall Street Journal reported](#).

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Struggle: police departments losing officers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.wsj.com/articles/police-departments-are-losing-officers-and-struggling-to-replace-them-11643288401?mod=hp_lead_pos12">https://www.wsj.com/articles/police-departments-are-losing-officers-and-struggling-to-replace-them-11643288401?mod=hp_lead_pos12</a>
GIST	<p>Columbus, Wis., a city of about 5,500 people between Madison and Milwaukee, lost three members of its nine-person police force last year. Unable to find replacements, Chief Dennis Weiner has taken on extra duties, including working a patrol shift on Thanksgiving Day.</p> <p>“It has really just been a terrible struggle trying to fill vacancies,” said Mr. Weiner of his efforts since one officer started a painting business, another took a maintenance job at a distribution center, and a third began studying to become an accountant.</p> <p>Across the country, police chiefs say they are struggling to keep departments fully staffed as resignations increase and hiring gets tougher in a tight labor market. At the same time, officers describe the job as more stressful and less rewarding than it was in the past. As a result, the chiefs say, departments are taking longer to respond to some calls while <a href="#">crimes including homicide</a> are on the rise nationwide.</p>

A survey of nearly 200 police departments last year by the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington, D.C., think tank, found that the resignation rate per 100 officers was up 18% between April 2020 and March 2021 compared with the prior-year period, while the rate of retirements rose 45%.

The number of police officers employed nationally dipped 1.6% in 2020, after rising over the past decade, according to the most recent data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The average annual pay for police officers was \$70,000 in 2020, compared with \$56,000 for all workers.

[In Minneapolis](#), where former police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murdering George Floyd and voters in November voted down a ballot measure to replace the police department with a new public-safety department, more than 300 officers have taken medical leave or retired since early 2020, when the police department had 860 officers.

Last year [record numbers of workers quit](#) their jobs across a range of industries, while job openings remained well above pre-pandemic levels. Many employers are increasing wages and offering bonuses to new hires, enticing more people to switch jobs.

There are now more job openings available to police officers in other fields with similar or higher pay that require less physical risk and stress, said Risdon Slate, a professor of criminology at Florida Southern College. “Those jobs don’t require putting your life on the line,” he said. “I think it makes it more difficult to find recruits these days.”

Some officers say they soured on the job after some police budgets were cut in the midst of “defund the police” movements that were supported by Black Lives Matter protesters. Others said that after high-profile deaths of Black men at the hands of police in recent years, interactions with community members became more confrontational.

John LaValley, a former police officer in Green Bay, Wis., said he was regularly called a Nazi and white supremacist while on patrol and eventually became suicidal. He quit in 2017 and worked for a time as a freight conductor for a railroad.

“I just lost the mental capacity, not only to handle and mitigate the violence that you see, but this perception of constant negativity,” he said.

Some cities, including New York and Los Angeles, have increased police funding in response to rising crime. Officials in Burlington, Vt., after voting in 2020 to cut the police force by 30%, in September approved \$10,000 bonuses to retain officers.

The Spokane County sheriff’s office in Washington spent \$200,000 on recruitment efforts last year, including advertising a \$15,000 bonus on billboards in cities where Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich said he felt elected officials weren’t adequately supporting law enforcement: Portland, Ore., Seattle, Austin, Texas, Denver and other parts of Colorado and Times Square in New York.

He hired 30 officers and new recruits, including one from as far away as South Carolina. That was still 10 short of his goal, and he now has 210 sworn officers and 50 open positions. Mr. Knezovich attributes the profession’s hiring woes to negative perceptions of policing, combined with a wave of retirements among aging officers and the tight labor market.

Republican lawmakers in Wisconsin recently introduced bills that would fund a \$1 million marketing campaign and bonuses in the thousands of dollars for officers to stay on the job or move from a different state. Police departments in the state currently employ 13,500 police officers, the lowest number in a decade.

Britt Cudaback, a spokeswoman for Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, said he is reviewing the measures.

	<p>“The law-enforcement profession received a ton of very negative media coverage after the horrific events in Minneapolis, and that led to, in my opinion, dramatically affecting our recruitment and retention,” said Pat Mitchell, president of the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police Association. He said he believed the legislative proposals could help recruitment efforts.</p> <p>His department in West Allis, just outside Milwaukee, currently has 126 officers and four vacancies, for which he has received 17 applicants. Five years ago he would have had 50 people apply, he said.</p> <p>Joy Kohegyi once thought she would retire after a long career in law enforcement, but last year she quit her police department in northern Wisconsin after 15 years.</p> <p>A photograph she posted that showed her walking away from her uniform was shared thousands of times on Facebook. As a detective sergeant, she worked on sensitive-crimes cases involving sexual assault and elder abuse, which she said eventually wore her down. Then working from home during the pandemic motivated her to try something new.</p> <p>“I got that taste of really being my own boss,” said Ms. Kohegyi. She now works as a real-estate agent, started a photography business and is remodeling camper vans with her boyfriend. “Leaving law enforcement saved my life,” she said.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 India: cases plateau but omicron surges</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/cases-plateauing-parts-india-omicron-surges-82528041">https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/cases-plateauing-parts-india-omicron-surges-82528041</a>
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI -- Indian health officials said Thursday there were signs of COVID-19 infections plateauing in some parts of the country but cautioned that cases were still surging in other states, linked to a new, stealthier version of the omicron variant.</p> <p>Most of the cases were concentrated in 10 states, where over 90% of patients had mild symptoms and were being treated at home, Lav Agarwal, a federal health official, said at a media briefing.</p> <p>The rate of infection in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi in the north, Maharashtra on the western coast, and West Bengal, Odisha in the east has begun dipping, he said. However, cases are still rising in the southern states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu along with Gujarat and Rajasthan in the northwest.</p> <p>“Early indication of a plateau in cases are being reported in certain geographies,” said Agarwal.</p> <p>He said that the number of people who needed oxygen support or had to be hospitalized during the current surge was lower than in the one fueled by the delta variant last year, which capsized India’s public health system.</p> <p>There are only a few states in India where the delta variant is still circulating. Genetic sequencing indicates that the initial spike in cases in December was powered by an early version of the omicron variant. But most new cases are now linked to a different version called BA.2 — a stealthier version of the omicron, which some scientists worry may also be more transmissible.</p> <p>The dip in cases has prompted some local authorities to relax restrictions. In New Delhi, restaurants, bars, and movie theaters can now run at half capacity.</p> <p>Health experts cautioned that with restrictions loosening, infections were likely to increase.</p> <p>“This is a balance that we always have to play with,” said Dr. Jacob John, who studies viruses at the Christian Medical College in southern Vellore city.</p>

	<p>Over half of India's population is fully vaccinated. And around 20% are waiting for a second shot. India started giving a booster shot to some vulnerable groups earlier in January, but health officials said that there has been no discussion about whether booster shots were necessary for the wider population.</p> <p>The country detected over 250,000 new infections on Friday, but Dr. Vineeta Bal, who studies immune systems at the Indian Institute of Science Education Research in Pune city, warned that these were definitely an undercount.</p> <p>She said that India's pandemic efforts were still being marred by chronic issues like under-reporting of infections and patchy data, but minimizing the number of people who needed to be hospitalized was key.</p> <p>“And fortunately, so far, even in the good, the bad and the ugly ... it hasn’t gone out of hand,” she said.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/27 Honduras first female president sworn in</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/honduras-president-sworn-amid-uncertainty-82513604">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/honduras-president-sworn-amid-uncertainty-82513604</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras -- Hondurans saw Xiomara Castro sworn in as their country’s first female president Thursday amid a sea of waving flags in the national stadium.</p> <p>Castro blasted the outgoing administration for leaving her a heavily indebted country where poverty and a lack of opportunity have driven hundreds of thousands of Hondurans to migrate in recent years.</p> <p>“My government will not continue the vortex that has condemned generations of young people to pay the debt taken on behind their backs,” Castro said.</p> <p>“We have the duty to restore the economic sector on the basis of transparency, efficiency, production, social justice, wealth distribution and national revenue,” she said.</p> <p>The 62-year-old Castro faces high expectations to turn around the deeply troubled country amid uncertainty about whether an unfolding legislative crisis will allow her the support she needs.</p> <p>Relatively smooth elections and a healthy margin of victory Nov. 28 came as a relief, but political maneuvering in the run-up to Castro’s inauguration has muddled the outlook and distracted from what was to be a hopeful new beginning after the two terms of President Juan Orlando Hernández.</p> <p>Honduras has been engulfed by a dispute over who will lead the newly elected Congress. Two congressional leadership teams have been selected — neither legitimately according to experts — and their standoff threatens legislative paralysis at a time that Castro desperately needs to quickly get to work addressing Honduras’ problems.</p> <p>Elected lawmakers from Castro’s own Liberty and Refoundation Party backed one of their own to be the new legislative body’s president Friday rather than support Castro’s choice, which had been agreed with her vice president to win his party’s support. Neither group backed down leading to surreal simultaneous legislative sessions Tuesday.</p> <p>High unemployment, persistent violence, corruption as well as troubled health care and educational systems are just some of the pressing challenges awaiting Castro.</p> <p>The United States government, seeing an opportunity to gain an ally in a region with few friends, has strongly backed Castro and stands ready to provide support. In a possible sign of tensions in the region, presidents from neighbors El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua were not scheduled to attend.</p> <p>Vice President Kamala Harris, who was given the task of addressing the challenge of Central American migration, met with Castro shortly after the inauguration ceremony.</p>

The two discussed “the root causes of migration, combatting corruption and expanding economic opportunity,” according to a statement from Harris’ office.

“Vice President Harris welcomed President Castro’s focus on countering corruption and impunity, including her intent to request the assistance of the United Nations in establishing an international anti-corruption commission and commitment to advancing necessary legislative reforms to enable such a commission to succeed,” the statement said.

Washington sees areas for cooperation on Castro’s priorities of battling corruption and increasing economic opportunities in her country, two areas that could affect decisions by Hondurans on whether to stay or try to migrate to the United States.

Jason Marczak, senior director of the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center at the Atlantic Council, said, “Honduras has been a very difficult partner for the United States, especially during the administration of Juan Orlando Hernandez for a number of reasons, including the consistent swirl of illegal activity around him and his family.”

“The anti-corruption agenda being front and center and her (Castro’s) pledges is music to the ears of the Biden-Harris administration, given its focus on rooting out corruption not only in Central America but its global efforts on corruption,” he said.

Castro said again Thursday she plans to formally invite the United Nations to set up an anti-corruption mission in Honduras.

That would be welcome by Hondurans like 22-year-old José Manuel Suazo, who waited for Castro’s appearance inside the stadium. He said he voted for Castro, and believes many other young people did too, because he wants her to attack corruption and end impunity.

Castro won on her third bid for the presidency. She was previously first lady during the presidency of her husband, Manuel Zelaya, which was cut short by a military coup in 2009.

On Thursday, just hours before her inauguration, Castro announced her cabinet picks via Twitter. There were two women out of 16 announced positions. Her son Hector Zelaya, will be her private secretary and Manuel Zelaya's nephew, José Manuel Zelaya, is her choice for defense secretary.

Ramón Sabillón, a former National Police chief, who recently returned after years living in exile in the United States, was her pick for security minister.

In her speech, Castro gave him a lengthy to-do list including guaranteeing “citizen security, no more death squads, no more silence on femicides, no more hired killers, no more drug trafficking, no more organized crime.”

Many voters this time said they were motivated above all by the possibility of removing Hernández’s National Party from power. Hernández was first elected in 2013 and a friendly Supreme Court allowed him to overcome a constitutional ban on re-election and run again in 2017 in an election plagued by irregularities.

Federal prosecutors in New York have repeatedly spoken of Hernández’s purported ties to drug trafficking, alleging his political rise was funded in part by drug profits. Hernández has not been formally charged and has repeatedly denied the accusations.

On Thursday, U.S. Rep. Norma Torres said in a statement she had asked Attorney General Merrick Garland to see that Hernández was indicted and extradited to the U.S.

"President Hernandez has been a central figure in undermining the rule of law in his own country and in protecting and assisting drug traffickers to move their materials through Honduras and to the United

	<p>States,” Torres said. “He has been repeatedly identified as a co-conspirator in other drug trafficking cases and has caused incredible pain to both the people of Honduras and the United States. I believe it is essential that the United States hold him accountable for his criminal behavior.”</p> <p>On Thursday afternoon, Hernández was sworn in as a representative of Honduras to the Central American Parliament, a traditional transition for Central American ex-presidents that affords them immunity from prosecution.</p> <p>Guatemalan representative on the regional body, Amilcar Pop, confirmed Hernández's swearing in, but said he withdrew from the virtual session because “I am against his swearing in, that he's given immunity.”</p> <p>On Thursday, 48-year-old Carlos Hernández lugged a nearly life-size Castro pinata through the streets near the stadium before the inauguration.</p> <p>“This is now or never,” Hernández said. “I do this out of conviction, we want our president to not fail us.”</p> <p>He and his family came because he wanted Castro to feel she had the support of the people. “I had never even voted, but I was sick and tired of the National (party).”</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/27 Rwanda to reopen Uganda border</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rwanda-reopen-uganda-border-ending-tense-standoff-82525920">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rwanda-reopen-uganda-border-ending-tense-standoff-82525920</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>KAMPALA, Uganda -- Rwandan authorities said early Friday they would reopen the border with Uganda, ending nearly three years of a standoff that appeared to hurt both countries' economies and raised fears of armed hostilities.</p> <p>The announcement came after a period of quiet diplomacy during which Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni dispatched envoys including his son, Lt. Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, to negotiate with his Rwandan counterpart Paul Kagame.</p> <p>Kainerugaba, who commands Uganda's infantry forces, was in Rwanda on Saturday. Earlier this week Museveni made key changes to his security apparatus, removing the chief of military intelligence who had been persistently criticized by Rwanda. That move appears to have placated Rwanda.</p> <p>Rwanda first closed the busy border crossing at Gatuna in February 2019. Subsequent talks mediated by Angola and Congo appeared to fail to resolve the dispute, compelling Uganda to negotiate privately with Rwanda.</p> <p>Rwanda's government says the border will officially reopen Monday. Its statement said it remained committed to the efforts to resolve pending issues and believes the announcement “will contribute positively to the speedy normalization of relations between the two countries.”</p> <p>The development will bring cheers in both Rwanda and Uganda after years of suffering for businesses that lost markets and other opportunities. Uganda, denied a major market for its exports, appeared to lose more at the height of what it called an effective trade embargo. Inside Rwanda the border closure eventually fueled a rise in the prices of dried foods.</p> <p>“Let me hope this is real and trade is allowed to resume, too,” said Rwandan trader Justin Murenzi, who used to import second-hand clothes from Uganda's capital but saw his business collapse amid the border standoff. “We can start life again and forget the past.”</p> <p>Rwanda’s government also had ordered its citizens not to travel to Uganda, claiming that Rwandan citizens were not safe across the border. It accused Ugandan authorities of backing rebels opposed to Kagame and demanded the expulsion from Uganda of the business interests of a Rwandan tycoon who is</p>



	<p>critical of Kagame. But Ugandan officials made a counter-charge accusing Rwandan state agents of operating unlawfully in Uganda, including in the alleged abductions of Rwandan citizens wanted back home.</p> <p>Tensions between Rwanda and Uganda raised fears of possible armed conflict as Kagame and Museveni made threatening remarks at public events. After Museveni warned that “those who try to destabilize our country do not know our capacity,” Kagame countered that “nobody anywhere can bring me to my knees.”</p> <p>In the 1990s the armies of Uganda and Rwanda went to war in eastern Congo when they backed rival rebel groups. Many parts of eastern Congo remain lawless, with armed groups still operating there. Some analysts have been concerned any tensions between Uganda and Rwanda could lead to a proxy conflict in eastern Congo.</p> <p>Kagame and Museveni, authoritarian leaders who have ruled their countries for many years, have increasingly disagreed in recent years as Kagame, once an intelligence lieutenant for Museveni, asserts his authority at home and in the region.</p> <p>Kagame, who grew up as a refugee in Uganda, was a Ugandan army major before he led Uganda-backed rebels who took power in Rwanda at the end of the 1994 genocide.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Chinese language school northern Iraq</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/north-iraq-chinese-language-school-projects-soft-power-82526819">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/north-iraq-chinese-language-school-projects-soft-power-82526819</a>
GIST	<p>IRBIL, Iraq -- In a classroom in northern Iraq, Zhiwei Hu presides over his students as a conductor would an orchestra. He cues with a question, and the response from his students resounds in perfect, fluent Chinese.</p> <p>The 52-year-old has been teaching the cohort of 14 Iraqi Kurdish students at the behest of the Chinese consulate in the northern city of Irbil.</p> <p>His class is part of an experiment with the local Salahaddin University: If these students succeed in graduating, the Chinese Language Department would be officially open for enrollment, giving the growing plethora of Chinese companies in Iraq’s Kurdish region their pick for hires.</p> <p>Regin Yasin sits at the front. “I wanted to learn Chinese because I know China will have an upper hand in the future,” the 20-year-old student said. “China will expand here, that’s why I chose it.”</p> <p>China’s interests in Iraq, anchored in energy to quench its growing needs, are expanding. Beijing is building power plants, factories, water treatment facilities, as well as badly needed schools across the country.</p> <p>Dozens of contracts signed in recent years ensure China’s growing footprint, even as major Western companies, including the U.S., plot their exit. While Iraqi officials say they desire a greater U.S. presence, they find appeal in China’s offer of development without conditions for democracy or reform and its deft diplomacy.</p> <p>“The language school is a projection of Chinese soft power, to familiarize the region with China. The more familiar they are, the more attracted they will be to Chinese goods,” said Sardar Aziz, a researcher who recently wrote a Kurdish-language book about China-Iraq relations.</p> <p>Chinese companies dominate Iraq’s key economic sector, oil, and Beijing consumes 40% of Iraq’s crude exports. But from a narrow focus on hydrocarbons, Chinese investments have grown to include other industries, finance, transport, construction and communications.</p>

The shift was spurred following Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2013 announcement of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, dubbed the new Silk Road, composed of a vast array of development and investment initiatives from East Asia through the Middle East to Europe. The U.S. considers it unsettling, akin to a Trojan horse for Chinese expansion.

The initiative calls for China to develop relations with states along its path through political coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade and financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.

In 2017, the Chinese consulate approached Salahaddin University's College of Languages with the idea of a Chinese language department. Opening a school in the capital Baghdad came with security risks, but the northern Kurdish-run region was relatively secure.

At first, the university wasn't sure it would appeal to students or that it could find qualified instructors, the college's dean, Atif Abdullah Farhadi, said.

So Farhadi required the consulate to provide and pay for teachers, textbooks, an audio lab and other classroom technologies and exchange opportunities in Beijing.

"They fulfilled all of the demands," said Farhadi. The department opened in 2019 and is set to graduate its first cohort next year. "Then we will expand."

The students said learning to write in Mandarin, the official language of mainland China, was the hardest part. Thousands of special characters had to be memorized.

And then there was pronunciation.

"Their tongues trembled," Hu said. After five hours of lessons, five times a week over three years, "They are speaking very well."

Farhadi wishes it could be the same for the English Language Department; the U.S. and British consulates have seldom offered help, he said.

"They don't support us at all," he said.

As China grows its economic footprint, Western oil firms are reducing theirs. Many have expressed discontent with Iraq's risky investment environment and unfavorable contract terms.

U.S. oil giant Exxon Mobil's exit from West Qurna 1 field last year came despite Iraqi pleas to stay, Oil Minister Ihsan Abduljabbar Ismail told The Associated Press at the time. The presence of a major U.S. company in Iraq had long served as a reassurance for other companies.

British Petroleum, operator of Iraq's largest oil field Rumaila, plans to spin off its business there with another entity jointly owned with China's CNPC. Other oil companies, including Russia's Lukoil, are demanding amendments to contract terms as a condition to remain.

Chinese companies dominate oil contracts, from operating fields to providing downstream services, and they continue to win more. Recently, Iraq finalized terms with China's Sinopec to develop Mansuriya gas field, which could produce 300 million standard cubic feet per day if approved by Iraq's next government.

Investing in Iraq is a risk that China is willing to take. With lower profit margins, Chinese firms always offer more attractive, lower-price contracts, industry officials and Iraqi officials said.

Thursday is "Chinese Corner" at the language department.

Chinese businesses -- from oil to wallpapering -- come and meet the students under the pretext of practicing language skills. Most end up with promises for future employment.

“We speak in Chinese and talk about business and the future,” said one student, Hiwar Saadi. “They come to us to meet us and make a connection.”

Two students are already working part-time for a Chinese telecommunications company as translators.

“It’s the opposite in every other department in the university. Supply is high but the demand for jobs is low,” Farhadi said. “Here, the students are turning down job offers in order to focus on study.”

Lessons cover aspects of Chinese culture and history as well. Hu is always quick to remind the students of Beijing and Irbil’s shared golden past: Iraq was part of the ancient Silk Road trade route, linking China’s Han dynasty with the West.

A former Iraqi ambassador to Beijing, Mohammed Saber, said that during his time there, Chinese officials often recalled their shared history. Many Chinese also remembered how in the 1950s, Iraq shipped tons of dates to China to help during famine.

When Sabir began his post in 2004, Iraq-China trade stood at around half a billion dollars. When he left in 2010 it was \$10 billion. Last year it reached roughly \$30 billion.

“They need our oil, and we need to find a market to sell our oil. The road goes two ways,” he said.

Yao Yan, a Beijing native selling Chinese-made goods in Irbil’s Langa Market, agrees.

A small figure surrounded by mounds of handbags and shoes, she said Iraq offered her better economic prospects. She sends her earnings back home to care for her disabled teenage son.

“Even when there is an economic crisis here,” she said, referring to last year’s liquidity crisis spurred by falling oil prices, “The money is still good for China.”

At the language school, Diaa Sherzad has just completed an oral exam.

The 21-year-old said he is always thinking about what to do next. “The most important thing is how I can serve my people. If I know Chinese, it will help. For the future, for everything.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 US, NATO military moves as message</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-nato-military-moves-send-message-russia-ukraine/story?id=82462943">https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-nato-military-moves-send-message-russia-ukraine/story?id=82462943</a>
GIST	<p>Wednesday's arrival of American F-15 fighters in Estonia to join an ongoing NATO air policing mission over the Baltics would normally not garner much attention were it not for the rising tensions of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>While the F-15's weeklong deployment to Estonia to join fighter jets from Belgium had been in the works for a while, Thursday's arrival in Lithuania of four Danish F-16 fighters for a similar mission was a more recent decision by Denmark tied to the rising tensions over Ukraine.</p> <p>Though small in scope, Denmark's deployment of the additional aircraft and a ship to the Baltic Sea sends a message to Russia about the willingness by NATO countries to demonstrate their military capabilities and commitment to NATO partners during a crisis.</p> <p>The deployments also highlight NATO's existing presence in eastern Europe and the Baltics, prompted by Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea, and how any military movements are being viewed through the prism of the crisis with Ukraine, no matter the size of the deployment.</p>

Since Ukraine is not a member of NATO, the alliance has no security commitment to Ukraine should Russia invade, but it is intent on assuring the security of neighboring NATO countries.

On Wednesday, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that while diplomatic efforts continue to try to defuse the crisis with Russia "we are also prepared for the worst."

Stoltenberg also said this week's announcement by the Pentagon that 8,500 troops in the United States had been placed on heightened alert demonstrated "demonstrates the strength of the NATO alliance."

On Monday, the Pentagon announced that most of the troops had been placed on shortened "prepare to deploy orders" in case they were needed for the 40,000 man NATO Response Force was activated on short notice to respond to a crisis.

That same day Stoltenberg had detailed the movement of small numbers of ships, airplanes, and troops by Denmark and other NATO countries to eastern Europe and the Baltics.

Ironically, it was Russia's 2014 takeover of Crimea that prompted NATO and the U.S. to initially rotate more robust military forces into eastern Europe and the Baltics.

That includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland where in recent years NATO has positioned four battlegroups consisting of 4,000 multinational troops, including American forces.

Separately Russia's annexation of Crimea led the United States to establish high-profile troop rotations in eastern Europe, currently there are 5,000 American forces carrying out training Poland.

Both the U.S. and NATO have been very public with any new or potential military call-ups or deployments to message to Russia that the alliance remains strong and has the capability of quickly reinforcing member nations that request assistance.

That messaging can include disclosing military planning and procedures that are not normally made public.

The Pentagon's top spokesman acknowledged on Tuesday that publicly announcing that 8,500 American military on heightened alert and on shorter "prepare to deploy orders" was not customary for the U.S. military.

"It's not typical that we talk about it as much as we've been talking about it," John Kirby told reporters.

Kirby also noted that the 8,500 troops on alert have not received orders to deploy and that the thousands of American troops already stationed in Europe were more likely to initially resource the NATO Response Force should it be activated.

The public messaging about military readiness is in line with the very public warnings to Russia by President Biden and American allies that a Russian invasion of Ukraine would have severe economic consequences for Russia.

"Although "strategic ambiguity" is an essential part of our international diplomacy, in this case, Russia needed to have a strong and unified message from the U.S. and NATO," said Mick Mulroy a former deputy assistant of defense and an ABC News national security contributor.

"The Pentagon has also been very forthcoming on all its activities," he said. "This is likely in an attempt to avoid any misinterpretation of their actions."

Mulroy that Russia should do the same particularly with more than 100,000 ground troops on Ukraine's borders.

	"Without constant communication, this situation could lead to a conflict in which every nation involved, and even those that are not, is negatively impacted," he said.
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

## Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 Britain: brace for Russia cyberattacks</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/brace-russian-cyber-attacks-over-ukraine-britain-says-2022-01-28/">https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/brace-russian-cyber-attacks-over-ukraine-britain-says-2022-01-28/</a>
GIST	<p>LONDON, Jan 28 (Reuters) - Britain warned big business on Friday to bolster defences against possible Russian cyber attacks as Western fears deepened that President Vladimir Putin would order his troops to annex another part of Ukraine.</p> <p>The United States, the European Union and Britain have repeatedly warned Putin against attacking Ukraine after Russia deployed around 100,000 troops near the border with its former Soviet neighbour.</p> <p>Russian officials say the West is gripped by Russophobia and has no right to lecture Moscow on how to act after it expanded the NATO military alliance eastwards after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union and sowed chaos in Iraq and Syria.</p> <p>Britain's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), a part of the GCHQ eavesdropping intelligence agency, warned large organisations to bolster their cyber security resilience amid the deepening tensions over Ukraine.</p> <p>Western leaders say the 21st Century will be defined by a struggle between democracies and rivals such as China and Russia who they say are challenging the post-Cold War consensus militarily, technologically and economically.</p> <p>"Over several years, we have observed a pattern of malicious Russian behaviour in cyberspace," said Paul Chichester, NCSC director of operations.</p> <p>A cyber attack on Ukraine earlier this month warned Ukrainians to "be afraid and expect the worst". Ukraine said Moscow was behind the attack.</p> <p>"Incidents in Ukraine bear the hallmarks of similar Russian activity we have observed before," said Chichester.</p> <p>The world's top cyber offensive powers are the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia and China, according to a 2020 ranking by the Belfer Center at Harvard's Kennedy School.</p> <p>Britain's spymasters say Russia remains the biggest immediate threat to the West but Communist China's long-term dominance of technology poses a much bigger problem.</p> <p>"UK organisations are being urged to bolster their cyber security resilience in response to the malicious cyber incidents in and around Ukraine," Britain's National Cyber Security Centre said.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 BlackCat ransomware: high victim count</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cyberscoop.com/black-cat-ransomware-growth-rust/">https://www.cyberscoop.com/black-cat-ransomware-growth-rust/</a>
GIST	Despite being a relative newcomer, the BlackCat ransomware family is moving up the list of the most prolific operators in the space, according to a report from Palo Alto Network's Unit 42 threat intelligence unit.

The [group's latest report, published Thursday and first reported by CyberScoop](#), found that as of December 2021, BlackCat has the seventh-most victims among all ransomware groups Unit 42 tracks, a remarkable feat considering that BlackCat initially garnered notice in mid-November 2021.

“This highlights a worrying trend that newcomers (or reformed groups) can attack many victims in a short space of time,” the researchers wrote.

BlackCat is a typical ransomware group in some ways, but has novel aspects that Unit 42 analyzed. Its ransomware is written in Rust, a [computer coding language growing in popularity](#) for its web application benefits, memory management and efficiency. Rust has been used in malware in the past, but BlackCat might be the first ransomware to use it in the wild, the researchers wrote, [building off previous findings](#) from early December 2021 by Recorded Future and MalwareHunterteam.

“Given its numerous native options, Rust is highly customizable, which facilitates the ability to pivot and individualize attacks,” they wrote.

BlackCat also offers a higher return for affiliates. Ransomware as a service is not uncommon, but BlackCat’s offer to let affiliates keep 80% to 90% of ransom payments, with the remainder going to the BlackCat author, may help explain its growth.

Ransoms are also an interesting feature of BlackCat’s rise, the researchers note: Affiliates using the malware have been observed asking for as much as \$14 million in bitcoin or monero, nearly three times the average ransom demand of \$5.3 million asked for in the first half of 2021, Unit 42 reports.

“BlackCat is an innovative and sophisticated ransomware family,” the researchers wrote, “that is rapidly forming a reputation for its highly customized and individualized attacks.”

It’s fairly standard in other regards: The victims posted to its leak site span a range of industries in the U.S., Europe and the Philippines such as construction, engineering, retail, transportation, pharmaceuticals and others, suggesting a somewhat opportunistic approach. It also employs a so-called double extortion method, where a target’s data not only has been encrypted, the group also threatens to publish stolen data to cause embarrassment for the target.

In some cases the group also threatens to launch distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against the target, which would overwhelm its website and prevent legitimate traffic from getting through.

Signs point to at least a Russian element to BlackCat. The group advertises in Russian-speaking forums, and the malware is written in Russian, Palo Alto Networks said. As the West threatens Russia over its hostilities toward Ukraine, the Kremlin has been publicizing law enforcement actions against hacking groups operating on its soil, [most recently leaders of the Infracore Organization](#).

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 FTC: social media fraud losses skyrocket</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.cyberscoop.com/ftc-says-americans-are-losing-more-money-to-social-media-fraud-than-ever-before/">https://www.cyberscoop.com/ftc-says-americans-are-losing-more-money-to-social-media-fraud-than-ever-before/</a>
GIST	<p>Losses from fraud originating on social media skyrocketed in 2021, according to data the Federal Trade Commission released Thursday.</p> <p><a href="#">More than 95,000 individuals</a> reported losses totaling \$770 million as a result of fraud initiated on social media. That number is up from \$258 million in 2020 and just \$42 million in 2017.</p> <p>Part of that growth has been <a href="#">driven by record losses</a> to cryptocurrency scams. Investment scams made up 37% of all reported fraud losses originating on social media in 2021, according to Thursday’s report.</p>



Scammers have found a wide range of ways to dupe cryptocurrency investors, such as so-called “giveaway” scams where victims are told to send in money for a large investment return that never appears. Those scams have popped up quickly [after surges in popularity of a new coin](#) and even with focused efforts, [social media platforms have struggled to stop them](#).

The FTC in March 2021 reported a significant increase in cryptocurrency investment scams with victims reporting nearly \$80 million in losses between October 2020 and March 2021 alone. Victims are often unable to recoup losses from these scams.

The largest number of reports, however, traced back to online shopping scams where fraudsters advertised misleading or nonexistent products on social media.

“In nearly 70% of these reports, people said they placed an order, usually after seeing an ad, but never got the merchandise,” the FTC reports. “Some reports even described ads that impersonated real online retailers that drove people to lookalike websites.”

Nearly nine out of 10 reports named Facebook or Instagram as the source in their reports of undelivered goods.

Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, did not respond to a request for comment.

Such scams have also proliferated on other social media platforms, including [TikTok](#) and [YouTube](#), as security firm Tenable has noted.

Romance scams — in which a stranger fakes a romantic interest or “catfishes” an individual and then asks for money — made up the remainder of reports, alongside “other frauds.” Facebook also played a big role in these reports: More than a third of people who said they lost money to [an online romance scam](#) in 2021 said it began on Facebook or Instagram.

Interestingly, fraud originating from social media is the only kind of fraud where people ages 18 to 39 were more than twice as likely as older adults to report losing money to that type of scam.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Shipment delivery scams spoof couriers</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://threatpost.com/shipment-delivery-scams-a-fav-way-to-spread-malware/178050/">https://threatpost.com/shipment-delivery-scams-a-fav-way-to-spread-malware/178050/</a>
GIST	<p>Threat actors are increasingly using scams that spoof package couriers like DHL or the U.S. Postal Service in authentic-looking phishing emails that attempt to dupe victims into downloading credential-stealing or other malicious payloads, researchers have found.</p> <p>Researchers from Avanan, a Check Point company, and Cofense have discovered recent phishing campaigns that include malicious links or attachments aimed at infecting devices with Trickbot and other dangerous malware, they <a href="#">reported separately</a> on Thursday.</p> <p>The campaigns separately relied on trust in widely used methods for shipping and employees’ comfort with receiving emailed documents related to shipments to try to elicit further action to compromise corporate systems, researchers said.</p> <p>Indeed, this trend has become so prevalent that it even earned DHL the dubious distinction of replacing Microsoft at the top of <a href="#">the Check Point Software list of brands</a> most imitated by threat actors in the fourth quarter of 2021. Scams related to the courier accounted for 23 percent of all phishing emails during that time frame when the company’s name had been attached to only 9 percent of scams in the third quarter.</p> <p>Specifically, a recent Trickbot phishing campaign discovered by the Cofense Phishing Defense Center uses emails that claim to be a missed-delivery notice from the U.S. Post Office but instead include a malicious link, according to a report published Thursday.</p>

Meanwhile, researchers from Avanan earlier this month discovered a new wave of hackers spoofing DHL in phishing emails that aim to spread “a dangerous Trojan virus” by notifying victims that a shipment has arrived and asking them to click on an attachment to find out more details.

### **Fooled by Trusted Brands**

Researchers attributed a couple of factors behind the ramp-up in scams related to package delivery. Spoofing DHL certainly made sense in the fourth quarter of last year during the busy holiday-shopping season, noted Jeremy Fuchs, cybersecurity researcher and analyst from Avanan, in [a report](#) on the latest DHL-related scam, published Thursday.

“Now, hackers are taking advantage of this, by attaching malware to a DHL spoof,” which will likely attract attention from a recipient in part because of its use of a trusted company, he wrote in the report. Moreover, [shipping delays and supply-chain issues](#) have become commonplace during the pandemic, which also has spurred a massive increase in people working remotely from home.

Attaching a malicious invoice link to a fake USPS missed-delivery notification, then – as threat actors did in the recently discovered Trickbot campaign – would be an attractive lure for potential victims accustomed to receiving these types of emails, according to Cofense.

“With the supply-chain delays, receiving a notification that a delivery attempt was missed can lead to frustration and entice the recipient to open the invoice link to further investigate,” Cofense PDC researchers Andy Mann and Schyler Gallant wrote in the report.

Indeed, an unrelated [study](#) from security firm F-Secure that simulated sending phishing emails to more than 82,000 corporate employees found that email scams aiming to share a document with, or to report a service issue to, potential victims likely will have more success when documents are tied to a trusted brand.

### **Tricked Into Trickbot**

In both of the recent delivery service-related campaigns, attackers aimed to make the scams appear as authentic as possible to convince users to commit further actions to download malicious payloads, researchers said.

The emails used to deliver [Trickbot](#) include official USPS branding as well as details such as third-party social-media logos from Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter, “to make the email look even more legitimate,” researchers wrote.

However, the emails include a sender address completely unrelated to the USPS, which easily could have alerted someone to its dodgy intent, they said.

If the lure works and a user clicks on the link to the purported invoice, they are directed to a domain, [hxxps://www.zozter\[.\]com/tracking/tracking\[.\]php](#), that downloads a ZIP file. The unzipped file is an XMLSM spreadsheet named “USPS\_invoice\_EA19788988US.xlsm” that purportedly requires editing due to document protection – a tactic often used in malicious email campaigns.

If a victim goes so far as to enable editing, it will trigger a malicious PowerShell process that ultimately downloads Trickbot. The banking trojan was first discovered in 2016 but [has evolved](#) into one of the [most widely used tools](#) for cybercriminal activity, [full of malicious capabilities](#).

### **Duping with DHL**

The attack spoofing DHL also includes what threat actors want victims to believe is a shipping document, but this time in the form of an attachment, Avanan’s Fuchs described in his report.

“By spoofing a popular brand, the hackers are hoping to target vulnerable users who are accustomed to checking for shipping notifications,” he wrote.

	<p>However, the attachment itself doesn't include a document file. Rather, it instead directs the recipient to a credential-harvesting web page, Fuchs explained. Clicking on the file also installs an unspecified trojan that also can lift other sensitive data and ultimately take over the victim's computer "to propagate more attacks on your network," he wrote.</p> <p>Fuchs said the attack has its origins in a previous attack observed by Check Point that spoofed FedEx in a similar vein to deliver the Snake Keylogger malware.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Water supply absolutely vulnerable</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.securityweek.com/us-says-national-water-supply-absolutely-vulnerable-hackers">https://www.securityweek.com/us-says-national-water-supply-absolutely-vulnerable-hackers</a> <a href="https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/ics-security/white-house-epa-expand-cybersecurity-initiative-to-water-sector">https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/ics-security/white-house-epa-expand-cybersecurity-initiative-to-water-sector</a>
GIST	<p>Cyber defenses for US drinking water supplies are "absolutely inadequate" and vulnerable to large-scale disruption by hackers, a senior official said Thursday.</p> <p>"There's inadequate resilience to even a criminal sector," the official said. "The threshold of resilience is not what it needs to be."</p> <p>President Joe Biden has attempted to address infrastructure cybersecurity but is limited by the fact that the vast majority of services are provided by private, not government, companies.</p> <p>The scale of the challenge became clear in May last year when a ransomware attack temporarily <a href="#">crippled the Colonial Pipeline</a>, a major oil pipeline network. A similar attack was <a href="#">carried out on JBS</a>, one of the world's biggest meat-processing companies.</p> <p>US officials, who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity, unrolled a plan to get water companies to cooperate with the government in a concerted effort to close up security gaps. The government is asking companies to share information of attacks and to cooperate in hardening defenses.</p> <p>"The bottom line is that really after decades of us kicking the can down the road... the administration really takes steps to reverse this trend," one official said.</p> <p>However, the program, similar to initiatives already in place for the electric and natural gas sectors, is voluntary.</p> <p>There's also a hurdle in the sheer number of different water providers -- about 150,000 systems serving 300 million Americans, the official said.</p> <p>These systems are increasingly automated, with computers managing treatment, storage and distribution. "These processes -- I want to underscore this point -- could all be vulnerable to cyberattacks, which could disable or manipulate monitoring control systems," the official said.</p> <p>"We're particularly concerned that a cyberattack could be carried out, for example, to manipulate treatment processes to produce unsafe water. Also to damage water infrastructure or even to stop the flow of water," the official said.</p> <hr/> <p>An industrial control system cybersecurity initiative established by the Biden administration for the electric and pipeline industries will be expanded to include <a href="#">critical infrastructure entities in the water and wastewater sectors</a>.</p> <p>The initiative, which will be managed by the Environmental Protection Agency, will take place over the next 100 days and includes a series of actions that are designed to improve the coordination between</p>

industry and the federal government, deploy new technologies to help protect industrial control systems and improve information sharing channels.

As part of a plan developed jointly by the EPA, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the National Security Council and two water sector coordinating councils, the government will provide enhanced technical support to establish a new task force of leaders in the water sector, road test new pilots to push for the adoption of incident monitoring technologies and work to improve information sharing and data analysis around cyber threats.

“The action plans for the electric grid and pipelines have already resulted in over 150 electricity utilities serving over 90 million residential customers and multiple critical natural gas pipelines deploying additional cybersecurity technologies,” Anne Neuberger, deputy national security advisor for cyber and emerging threats at the National Security Council, said in a statement. “This plan will build on this work and is another example of our focus and determination to use every tool at our disposal to modernize the nation’s cyber defenses, in partnership with private sector owners and operators of critical infrastructure.”

Many of the actions would be voluntary, and the White House referenced past incidents like the Colonial Pipeline and JBS ransomware attacks highlight the government’s “limited authorities to set cybersecurity baselines for critical infrastructure and managing this risk requires partnership with the private sector and municipal owners and operators.”

#### **Water industry vulnerable to cyberattacks**

The water industry is made up of thousands of different systems, many of which face strapped budgets and have little in the way of cybersecurity expertise. As part of its cybersecurity mission, CISA has been offering vulnerability scans and technical assessments for critical infrastructure entities, but do not have nearly the resources or personnel to cover everyone.

The [American Water Works Association](#) has called cybersecurity “the top threat facing businesses and critical infrastructure” in the water sector and stressed that the diverse nature of the water and wastewater sector, with organizations of varying size and ownership, a fractured splintered regulatory landscape, and a lack of cybersecurity governance protocols “present significant cybersecurity challenges.”

Like many critical infrastructure sectors, water entities “often face insufficient financial, human and technological resources” with many organizations dealing with “limited budgets, aging computer systems, and personnel who may lack the knowledge and experience for building robust cybersecurity defenses and responding effectively to cyber attacks.”

Officials are also highly concerned about a number of incidents, including an incident last year when an unidentified hacker gained access to [a water treatment plant in Oldsmar, Florida](#), and attempted to increase the levels of lye in the local water supply by more than 100 times, something that could have poisoned thousands of residents. Officials at the plant say they witnessed the attack and reduced the levels back to normal immediately.

It’s far from the only example. Last year, [a CISA alert](#) highlighted at least five such incidents over the past three years, many of them [ransomware related](#).

In July 2021, malicious hackers hit an unnamed California water facility with Ghost ransomware and the malware eventually infecting SCADA systems. A month before that, another actor exploited remote access to infect a Maine water facility with ZuCaNo ransomware, forcing the operators to manually run their water treatment system until they could restore from backups. Similar ransomware infections happened in March 2021 and September 2020 for water facilities in Nevada and New Jersey, while a former employee at a Kansas water facility was caught attempting to use his still active user credentials to remotely access a computer at the facility.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	<a href="https://www.securityweek.com/microsoft-saw-record-breaking-ddos-attacks-exceeding-3-tbps">https://www.securityweek.com/microsoft-saw-record-breaking-ddos-attacks-exceeding-3-tbps</a>
GIST	<p>Microsoft this week reported mitigating several massive distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks aimed at its customers last year.</p> <p>In October, the tech giant said one of its Azure customers had been hit in a DDoS attack that peaked at 2.4 terabits per second (Tbps), which at the time had been one of the largest attacks ever reported.</p> <p>However, in November and December 2021, the company's Azure DDoS Protection team saw even bigger attacks, including one that peaked at 3.47 Tbps and a packet rate of 340 million packets per second (pps).</p> <p>This attack, aimed at one of Microsoft's Azure customers in Asia, is believed to be the largest seen to date. The record-breaking attack was powered by 10,000 sources from around the world.</p> <p>Another attack peaked at 3.25 Tbps and a third peaked at 2.55 Tbps — both attacks were aimed at unnamed organizations located in Asia.</p> <p>In the second half of 2021, Microsoft mitigated nearly 2,000 DDoS attacks per day, which represented a 40% increase compared to the first half of the year. The total number of attacks aimed at the company's customers in the second half was roughly 360,000 unique attacks.</p> <p>“Interestingly, there was not as much of a concentration of attacks during the end-of-year holiday season compared to previous years,” Microsoft said. “We saw more attacks in Q3 than in Q4, with the most occurring in August, which may indicate a shift towards attackers acting all year round—no longer is holiday season the proverbial DDoS season! This highlights the importance of DDoS protection all year round, and not just during peak traffic seasons.”</p> <p>In terms of attack vectors, UDP attacks were the most common in the second half of 2021, accounting for 55% of attacks, followed by TCP attacks, which decreased from 54% to 19%.</p> <p>The gaming industry was hit the hardest, but Microsoft reported seeing an increase in attacks on financial institutions, media, ISPs, retail and supply chain organizations.</p> <p>More than half of the targeted organizations were in the United States, followed by India and East Asia.</p> <p>As for duration, the tech giant reported observing a significant increase in attacks lasting more than an hour.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Hacker flags flaws in Swiss railway system</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/hacker-flags-flaw-in-swiss-railway/">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/hacker-flags-flaw-in-swiss-railway/</a>
GIST	<p>An anonymous hacker has raised the alarm after discovering a vulnerability impacting Switzerland's national railway system.</p> <p>The flaw allowed the hacker to gain access to personal data belonging to around 500,000 individuals who had purchased tickets to ride on Swiss Federal Railways (SFR).</p> <p>After detecting a weak spot in SFR's Swiss Card system, the hacker reported it to the Rundschau show, which airs on Swiss public television, SRF.</p> <p>Information left vulnerable by the flaw included travelers' names, dates of birth, the number of first- and second-class tickets they purchased, places of departure and final destinations.</p> <p>Speaking to the Rundschau program, the hacker said that anyone could have easily viewed the data as no specialist IT knowledge was needed to exploit the flaw.</p>

“The sensitive data was practically public on the internet,” said the hacker.

The security breach was reported to Switzerland’s Federal Data Protection Commissioner.

According to Swiss news site Swiss Info, the data compromised by the hacker was never made public and has since been secured by SFR.

The hacker said that their motivation in exploiting the flaw was to expose its existence in the hope of averting a potentially malicious cyber-attack.

“This is a huge meltdown for Swiss Railways,” Otto Hostettler, an author and journalist specializing in cybercrime, told the Rundschau program.

“Such data can be sold in hacker forums on the dark web. In the wrong hands, it would have great potential for abuse.”

Cyber-criminals have been known to target the Swiss rail industry. In May 2020, hackers stole data from Swiss train manufacturer Stadler Rail and demanded a payment of \$6m in Bitcoin for its return.

Following the attack, Stadler released a statement saying that it “is not and has never been willing to make payments to blackmailers and has not entered into negotiations.”

In response to Stadler’s rebuff, the cyber-thieves published images of some of the stolen files on the internet. A message accompanying the images stated that the criminals had swiped no fewer than 10,000 documents from the train maker.

The company said it had backups of all the data compromised in the attack.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Data breach Florida drug screening lab
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/data-breach-at-drug-screening-lab/">https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/data-breach-at-drug-screening-lab/</a>
GIST	<p>A configuration error has caused a prolonged data breach at a Florida County’s drug screening laboratory.</p> <p>The security incident occurred at St. Lucie County’s Drug Screening Lab (SLC Lab), which supplies drug testing services for employment, court cases and other purposes.</p> <p>In a statement released January 20 2022, County leaders said that a misconfiguration detected in the lab’s website portal had inadvertently made some of the portal users’ personal data accessible for more than four years.</p> <p>“Upon learning of this issue, SLC Lab corrected the misconfiguration and immediately launched an investigation in consultation with outside cybersecurity professionals who regularly investigate and analyze these types of incidents,” said the officials.</p> <p>“SLC Lab devoted considerable time and effort to determine what information may have been accessible to unauthorized users.”</p> <p>A digital forensic investigation was launched to determine what data had been exposed by mistake.</p> <p>The County said: “SLC Lab discovered on December 28 2021 that the website portal misconfiguration allowed for data to be accessible to certain portal users between June 2 2017 and October 13 2021.”</p> <p>Data exposed in the incident included full names and one or more of the following: Social Security numbers, dates of birth and limited lab test type and result information.</p>



	<p>“To date, SLC Lab is not aware of any reports of identity fraud or improper use of any information as a direct result of this incident,” said the County.</p> <p>On January 20, the lab began notifying affected individuals of the security incident by letter and encouraging them to enroll in complimentary credit monitoring services. County leaders did not state how many residents of St. Lucie County may have had their data compromised.</p> <p>St. Lucie County spokesman Erick Gill told WPTV that the mistake impacted no other data in the care of the county.</p> <p>“SLC Lab is committed to maintaining the privacy of personal information in its possession and has taken many precautions to safeguard it,” said Gill.</p> <p>He added: “SLC Lab continually evaluates and modifies its practices to enhance the security and privacy of the personal information it maintains.”</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 LockBit strikes govt., Europe businesses</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.hackread.com/lockbit-ransomware-gang-french-justice-ministry-europe/">https://www.hackread.com/lockbit-ransomware-gang-french-justice-ministry-europe/</a>
GIST	<p>The infamous LockBit ransomware gang is claiming to have hit the Ministry of Justice of France (justice.fr) as part of its recent spree of ransomware attacks. Although the details of the attack are limited, according to the group’s official website the Ministry has 13 days to meet its demands or sensitive data of it will be published on February 10th, 2022.</p> <p><b>LockBit ransomware gangs hits Europe</b></p> <p>Hackread.com can exclusively confirm that the ransomware attack was not limited to the French Ministry of Justice. In fact, the group is claiming responsibility for hitting several top companies and businesses in several European countries including Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and United Kingdom.</p> <p>The full list of recent alleged victims of the LockBit ransomware gang are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Izo Group, Spain (Izo.es)</li> <li>2. ESTPM, France (Estpm.fr)</li> <li>3. City of Saint Cloud, France (Saintcloud.fr)</li> <li>4. Joda, Germany (Joda.de)</li> <li>5. Heubeck AG, Germany (Heubeck.de)</li> <li>6. Isnardi, Italy (Isnardi.it)</li> <li>7. La Ponte Marmi Srl, Italy (laponte.it)</li> <li>8. AMBAU Personalservice, Germany (Ambau-team.de)</li> <li>9. Girlguiding Charity, United Kingdom (Girlguidinglaser.org.uk).</li> </ol> <p>Screenshots from the LockBit ransomware gang’s official website on the dark web shows their current and most recent victims...</p> <p><b>About LockBit ransomware gang</b></p> <p>Like other ransomware gangs, LockBit’s modus operandi involves blocking victims’ access to computer systems in exchange for a ransom payment. LockBit, which itself is malicious software, automatically vets for valuable targets, spreads the infection and encrypts all accessible computer systems on a network.</p> <p>LockBit offers a ransomware-as-a-service (<a href="#">RaaS</a>) model, facilitating fellow cybercriminals or affiliates to launch ransomware attacks through its platform. The payments are usually divided between the malware developers and the entity hiring them for the attack.</p> <p>The Lockbit ransomware gang emerged on the threat spectrum back in September 2019 and made waves in June 2021 after launching LockBit 2.0 and recruiting new partners. The gang claims to offers the “fastest data exfiltration on the market through StealBit,” noted Emsisoft in the gang’s <a href="#">profile</a>.</p>

	<p>StealBit is a data stealer that can download 100 GB of data from an infected system within 20 minutes. Some of the gang's previous victims include <a href="#">Bangkok Airways</a>, <a href="#">Accenture</a>, and hundreds of other top-notch businesses across the globe.</p> <p>As for the ongoing ransomware attack, at the time of writing, none of the aforementioned companies released any statement to address the issue. However, this article will be updated based on their confirmation or denial.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Undetected years: Russian APT29 malware</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/russian-apt29-hackers-stealthy-malware-undetected-for-years/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/russian-apt29-hackers-stealthy-malware-undetected-for-years/</a>
GIST	<p><b>EXCLUSIVE:</b> Hackers associated with the Russian Federation Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) continued their incursions on networks of multiple organizations after the SolarWinds supply-chain compromise using two recently discovered sophisticated threats.</p> <p>The malicious implants are a variant of the GoldMax backdoor for Linux systems and a completely new malware family that cybersecurity company CrowdStrike now tracks as TrailBlazer.</p> <p>Both threats have been used in StellarParticle campaigns since at least mid-2019 but were identified only two years later, during incident response investigations.</p> <p>StellarParticle attacks have been attributed to the APT29 hacking group has been running cyber espionage campaigns for more than 12 years and is also known as CozyBear, The Dukes, and Yttrium.</p> <p><b>Stealing cookies for MFA bypass</b></p> <p>In a report shared exclusively with BleepingComputer, cybersecurity company CrowdStrike today describes in detail the latest tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) observed in cyberattacks from the Cozy Bear state-sponsored hackers.</p> <p>While some of the techniques are somewhat common today, Cozy Bear has been using them long before they became popular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• credential hopping</li> <li>• hijacking Office 365 (O365) Service Principal and Application</li> <li>• bypassing multi-factor authentication (MFA) by stealing browser cookies</li> <li>• stealing credentials using Get-ADReplAccount</li> </ul> <p>Credential hopping was the first stage of the attack, allowing the threat actor to log into Office 365 from an internal server that the hackers reached through a compromised public-facing system.</p> <p>CrowdStrike says that this technique is hard to spot on environments with little visibility into identity usage since hackers could use more than one domain administrator account.</p> <p>Bypassing MFA to access cloud resources by stealing browser cookies has been used since before 2020. CrowdStrike says that APT29 kept a low profile after decrypting the authentication cookies, likely offline, by using the Cookie Editor extension for Chrome to replay them; they deleted the extension afterwards.</p> <p>“This extension permitted bypassing MFA requirements, as the cookies, replayed through the Cookie Editor extension, allowed the threat actor to hijack the already MFA-approved session of a targeted user” - <a href="#">CrowdStrike</a></p> <p>This allowed them to move laterally on the network and reach the next stage of the attack, connecting to the victim's O365 tenant for the next stage of the attack.</p>

CrowdStrike's report describes the steps that APT29 took to achieve persistence in a position that allowed them to read any email and SharePoint or OneDrive files of the compromised organization.

### **GoldMax for Linux and TrailBlazer**

During their incident response work on APT29 StellarParticle attacks, CrowdStrike's researchers used the User Access Logging (UAL) database to identify earlier malicious account usage, which led to finding the GoldMax for Linux and TrailBlazer malware.

CrowdStrike says that TrailBlazer is a completely new malware family, while GoldMax for Linux backdoor "is almost identical in functionality and implementation to the previously identified May 2020 Windows variant."

The researchers believe that the little differences are between the two GoldMax versions are due to the continuous improvements from the developer for long-term detection evasion.

GoldMax was likely used for persistence (a crontab with a "@reboot" line for a non-root user) over long periods in StellarParticle campaigns. The backdoor stayed undetected by posing as a legitimate file in a hidden directory.

The TrailBlazer implant also hid under the name of a legitimate file and it was configured for persistence using the Windows Management Instrumentation (WMI) Event Subscriptions, a relatively new technique in 2019, the earliest known date for its deployment on victim systems.

TrailBlazer managed to keep communication with the command and control (C2) server covert by masking it as legitimate Google Notifications HTTP requests.

CrowdStrike notes that the implant has modular functionality and "a very low prevalence" and that it shares similarities with other malware families used by the same threat actor, such as GoldMax and [Sunburst](#) (both used in the SolarWinds supply-chain attack).

Tim Parisi, Director of Professional Services at CrowdStrike, told BleepingComputer that the covert activity of the two malware pieces delayed the discovery of the two malware pieces, as the researchers found them in mid-2021.

### **Recon and moving to Office 365**

After gaining access to a target organization's infrastructure and established persistence, APT29 hackers took every opportunity to collect intelligence that would allow them to further the attack.

One constant tactic was to draw information from the victim's internal knowledge repositories, the so-called wikis. These documents can hold sensitive details specific to various services and products in the organization.

"This information included items such as product/service architecture and design documents, vulnerabilities and step-by-step instructions to perform various tasks. Additionally, the threat actor viewed pages related to internal business operations such as development schedules and points of contact. In some instances these points of contact were subsequently targeted for further data collection" - [CrowdStrike](#)

Parisi told us that accessing company wikis was a common APT29 reconnaissance activity in the investigated StellarParticle attacks.

CrowdStrike's deep dive into APT29's StellarParticle campaigns offers details on how the threat actor connected to the victim's O365 tenant through the Windows Azure Active Directory PowerShell Module, and performed enumeration queries for roles, members, users, domains, accounts, or a service principal's credentials.

When analyzing the log entries, the researchers noticed that the threat actor also executed the AddServicePrincipalCredentials command.

“CrowdStrike analyzed the configuration settings in the victim’s O365 tenant and discovered that a new secret had been added to a built-in Microsoft Azure AD Enterprise Application, Microsoft StaffHub Service Principal, which had Application level permissions” – CrowdStrike

The adversary had added a new secret to the application and set its validity for more than 10 years, the researchers note.

The permission level obtained this way let hackers access to all mail and SharePoint/OneDrive files in the company and allowed them to “create new accounts and assign administrator privileges to any account in the organization.”

### **Maintaining persistence**

Once Cozy Bear/APT29 established persistence in a target organization they would maintain it for as long as possible, sometimes helped by the poor security hygiene of the compromised organization.

The longest time the threat actor spent inside an organization was two years, Parisi told BleepingComputer. Persisting this long would not be possible without some effort from the hackers, since organizations often rotate credentials as a security precaution.

To prevent losing access, Cozy Bear hackers would periodically refresh the stolen credentials by stealing new ones, oftentimes via Mimikatz.

In at least one case, though, the administrators of the compromised company reset their passwords to the same ones, thus defeating the purpose of credential rotation.

Cozy Bear hackers are some of the most sophisticated threat actors in the cyber espionage world, with top skills to infiltrate and stay undetected on a company's infrastructure for long periods.

During the StellarParticle attacks they demonstrated expert knowledge in Azure, Office 365, and Active Directory management.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Lazarus hackers exploit Windows update</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/lazarus-hackers-use-windows-update-to-deploy-malware/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/lazarus-hackers-use-windows-update-to-deploy-malware/</a>
GIST	<p>North Korean-backed hacking group Lazarus has added the Windows Update client to its list of living-off-the-land binaries (LoLBins) and is now actively using it to execute malicious code on Windows systems.</p> <p>The new malware deployment method was discovered by the Malwarebytes Threat Intelligence team while analyzing a January spearphishing campaign impersonating the American security and aerospace company Lockheed Martin.</p> <p>After the victims open the malicious attachments and enable macro execution, an embedded macro drops a WindowsUpdateConf.lnk file in the startup folder and a DLL file (wuaueng.dll) in a hidden Windows/System32 folder.</p> <p>In the next stage, the LNK file is used to launch the WSUS / Windows Update client (wuauc.exe) to execute a command that loads the attackers' malicious DLL.</p> <p>"This is an interesting technique used by Lazarus to run its malicious DLL using the Windows Update Client to bypass security detection mechanisms," <a href="#">Malwarebytes said</a>.</p>

The researchers linked these attacks to Lazarus based on several pieces of evidence, including infrastructure overlaps, document metadata, and targeting similar to previous campaigns.

#### **Defense evasion method revived in new attacks**

As [BleepingComputer reported in October 2020](#), this tactic was discovered MDSec researcher David Middlehurst, who found that attackers could use the Windows Update client to execute malicious code on Windows 10 systems (he also [spotted a sample](#) using it in the wild).

This can be done by loading an arbitrary specially crafted DLL using the following command-line options (the command Lazarus used to load their malicious payload):

```
wuaclt.exe /UpdateDeploymentProvider [path_to_dll] /RunHandlerComServer
```

MITRE ATT&CK classifies this type of defense evasion strategy as [Signed Binary Proxy Execution](#), and it allows attackers to bypass security software, application control, and digital certificate validation protection.

In this case, threat actors do it by executing malicious code from a previously dropped malicious DLL, loaded using the Windows Update client's Microsoft-signed binary.

#### **Notorious North Korean hacking group**

The Lazarus Group (also tracked as HIDDEN COBRA by US intel agencies) is a North Korean military hacking group active for more than a decade, since at least 2009.

Its operators coordinated the 2017 global [WannaCry](#) ransomware campaign and have been behind attacks against high-profile companies such as [Sony Films](#) and multiple [banks worldwide](#).

Last year, Google spotted Lazarus [targeting security researchers](#) in January as part of complex social engineering attacks and [a similar campaign](#) during March.

They were also observed using the previously undocumented ThreatNeedle backdoor in a large-scale cyber-espionage campaign against the [defense industry](#) of more than a dozen countries.

US Treasury [sanctioned three DPRK-sponsored hacking groups](#) (Lazarus, Bluenoroff, and Andariel) in September 2019, and the US government [offers a reward of up to \\$5 million](#) for info on Lazarus activity.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Taiwan electronics firm cyberattack victim
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/taiwanese-apple-and-tesla-contractor-hit-by-conti-ransomware/">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/taiwanese-apple-and-tesla-contractor-hit-by-conti-ransomware/</a>
GIST	<p>Delta Electronics, a Taiwanese electronics company and a provider for Apple, Tesla, HP, and Dell, disclosed that it was the victim of a cyberattack discovered on Friday morning.</p> <p>Delta <a href="#">claims</a> to be the world's largest provider of switching power supplies and reported sales of <a href="#">over \$9 billion last year</a>.</p> <p>In a statement shared on January 22, 2022, the company <a href="#">said</a> the incident impacted only non-critical systems, which had no significant impact on its operations. AdvIntel "Andariel" platform detected the attack on January 18.</p> <p>Delta is now working on restoring systems taken down during the attack and says it hired the services of third-party security experts to help with the investigation and recovery process.</p> <p>The electronics provider also said it notified government law enforcement agencies to assist with the follow-up investigation.</p>

While Delta's statement did not say who was behind the attack, an undisclosed information security company found a [Conti ransomware sample](#) deployed on the company's network, as [CTWANT](#) first reported.

### **\$15 million ransom for decrypting thousands of devices**

According to negotiations between Conti and Delta (also seen by BleepingComputer), the Conti operators claim to have encrypted 1,500 servers and 12,000 computers out of roughly 65,000 devices on Delta's network.

The Conti ransomware gang asked Delta to pay a \$15 million ransom for a decryptor and stop leaking files stolen from its network. Also promised a discount if the company would pay quickly.

While Delta is still reportedly working with Trend and Microsoft's security teams to investigate the incident and claims that its production has not been affected, its website is still down one week after the attack.

Delta's customers can use [this alternate domain](#) while the company brings back online its [main website](#), still down following the ransomware attack, as [The Record](#) found.

"The Conti ransomware group revealed a specific pattern part of the Delta attack leveraging Cobalt Strike with Atera for persistence as revealed by our platform adversarial visibility. Certainly, this attack is reminiscent of the REvil Quanta one affecting one of the Apple suppliers," Vitali Kremez, CEO of AdvIntel, told BleepingComputer.

[Conti](#) is a Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) operation linked to the Russian-speaking [Wizard Spider](#) cybercrime group.

The ransomware gang's operators have breached other high-profile orgs in the past, including Ireland's [Department of Health \(DoH\)](#) and [Health Service Executive](#) (HSE), and the [RR Donnelly \(RRD\) marketing giant](#).

A Delta Electronics spokesperson was not available for comment when contacted by BleepingComputer earlier today.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Subscription fraud campaign Android users</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/105-million-android-users-targeted-by-subscription-fraud-campaign/?&amp;web_view=true">https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/105-million-android-users-targeted-by-subscription-fraud-campaign/?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>A premium services subscription scam for Android has been operating for close to two years. Called ‘Dark Herring’, the operation used 470 Google Play Store apps and affected over 100 million users worldwide, potentially causing hundreds of millions of USD in total losses.</p> <p>‘Dark Herring’ was present in 470 applications on the Google Play Store, Android’s official and most trustworthy source of apps, with the earliest submission dating to March 2020.</p> <p>In total, the fraudulent apps were installed by 105 million users in 70 countries, subscribing them to premium services that charged \$15 per month through Direct Carrier Billing (DCB).</p> <p>DCB is a mobile payment option that lets people purchase digital content from the Play Store, charging it to their prepaid balance or postpaid bill.</p> <p>The operators of ‘Dark Herring’ cashed the subscriptions while users realized the fraudulent charges much later, sometimes several months after the infection.</p>



The discovery of 'Dark Herring' comes from Zimperium zLabs, a Google partner and member of the Google App Defense Alliance, whose goal is to tackle the malware problem on the Play Store.

### **How the malware works**

The long-term success of the Dark Herring relied on AV anti-detection capabilities, propagation through a large number of apps, code obfuscation, and the use of proxies as first-stage URLs.

While none of the above is new or groundbreaking, seeing them combined into a single piece of software is rare for Android fraud.

Moreover, the actors used a sophisticated infrastructure that received communications from all users of the 470 applications but handled each separately based on a unique identifier.

The installed app doesn't contain any malicious code but features a hard-coded encrypted string that points to a first-stage URL hosted on Amazon's CloudFront.

The response from the server contains links to additional JavaScript files hosted on AWS instances, which are downloaded onto the infected device.

These scripts prepare the app to acquire its configuration in relation to the victim, generate the unique identifiers, fetch the language and country details and determine which DCB platform is applicable in each case.

Finally, the app serves a customized WebView page that prompts the victim to enter their phone number, supposedly receive a temporary OTP (one-time passcode) code to activate the account on the application.

### **Apps and targets**

With 470 applications to distribute the malware, the targeted demographics was quite diverse. Most of these apps fell in the broader and more popular "Entertainment" category.

Other prevalent Dark Herring apps were photography tools, casual games, utilities, and productivity apps. One key factor in the consequences of the Dark Herring operation is the absence of DCB consumer protection laws, so some countries were targeted more zestfully than others.

Those at greater risk were India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Greece, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Bulgaria, Iraq, and Tunisia.

Even in countries where strict DCB protection rules apply, if the victims are late to realize the fraud, reverting the transactions may be impossible.

The most popular Dark Herring apps that each counts several million downloads are:

- Smashex
- Upgradem
- Stream HD
- Vidly Vibe
- Cast It
- My Translator Pro
- New Mobile Games
- StreamCast Pro
- Ultra Stream
- Photograph Labs Pro
- VideoProj Lab
- Drive Simulator
- Speedy Cars – Final Lap
- Football Legends
- Football HERO 2021

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grand Mafia Auto</li> <li>• Offroad Jeep Simulator</li> <li>• Smashex Pro</li> <li>• Racing City</li> <li>• Connectool</li> <li>• City Bus Simulator 2</li> </ul>
	To access the entire list of all 470 malicious Android applications, check out <a href="#">this GitHub page</a> .
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 REvil operations unaffected by arrests?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.securityweek.com/revil-ransomware-operations-apparently-unaffected-recent-arrests?&amp;web_view=true">https://www.securityweek.com/revil-ransomware-operations-apparently-unaffected-recent-arrests?&amp;web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>The REvil (Sodinokibi) ransomware cooperative's activity has not slowed down following Russia's recent move to arrest several alleged members of the group, according to threat intelligence company ReversingLabs.</p> <p>Two weeks have passed since Russia's law enforcement agency FSB <a href="#">announced the takedown of the REvil group</a> "at the request of US authorities," but the ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) enterprise remains as active as before.</p> <p>After long being accused of allowing cybercriminals to proliferate within its borders – as long as Russian nationals or organizations are not hurt – Russia appeared set to send a different message with the arrest of 14 members of the REvil gang, even if some saw it as a political move – amidst the increasing tensions at the Ukraine border.</p> <p>However, as ReversingLabs points out, the high-profile arrests of affiliates <a href="#">did not put a dent in REvil operations</a>. In fact, the group is continuing operations at the very same pace as just before the arrests.</p> <p>In November 2021, Europol announced the arrest of seven individuals involved in the proliferation of REvil and GandCrab ransomware attacks (the arrests were made over a period of 7 months), at which time ReversingLabs was seeing an average of 47 new REvil implants daily (326 per week).</p> <p>That number was higher compared to September (43 new implants per day - 307 per week) and October (22 new daily implants - 150 per week), but much lower compared to July (87 daily - 608 per week), when the <a href="#">group went offline</a>.</p> <p>Following Russia's arrests, the number of observed REvil implants increased from 24 per day (169 per week) to an average of 26 implants a day (180 per week).</p> <p>"While it's true that more time may be needed to assess the full impact of the arrests on REvil's activity, the data so far would suggest that it is 'business as usual' for the ransomware gang," ReversingLabs notes.</p> <p>"Threat groups exploit regionalised regulation, and distributed organizational structure with sovereign state safehousing, all while leveraging a 'no-rule' borderless attack strategy. That makes it ever harder for national and international criminal policing organizations to put an end to threat groups such as REvil," ReversingLabs senior threat researcher Andrew Yeates says.</p> <p>While coordinated action against REvil infrastructure may have had short-term impact on the RaaS's prevalence, much stronger action is needed to indeed halt the cybercrime ring's activities, especially given the corporation-like structure of the group, where affiliates are launching attacks and receiving payments.</p> <p>Thus, eliminating only affiliates doesn't take down the core of the RaaS and allows it to continue operations. On the other hand, if only the core is eliminated, affiliates can either rebuild the enterprise or migrate to a different RaaS, and this is true for other similar cybercriminal organizations as well.</p>

HEADLINE	01/27 New phishing uses unusual trick to spread
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.zdnet.com/article/attackers-add-rogue-pc-to-victims-networks-in-this-sneaky-phishing-campaign/?web_view=true">https://www.zdnet.com/article/attackers-add-rogue-pc-to-victims-networks-in-this-sneaky-phishing-campaign/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>Microsoft has raised an alarm about a new multi-phase phishing campaign that first enrolls an attacker's BYOD device on a corporate network and then begins sending thousands of convincing phishing emails to further targets.</p> <p>The purpose of enrolling or registering a device on a target company's network was to avoid detection during later phishing attacks, according to Microsoft.</p> <p>Microsoft says "most" organizations that had enabled multi-factor authentication (MFA) for Office 365 were not impacted by phishing emails spread by attacker-controlled registered devices, but those that had not enabled MFA were all affected.</p> <p>The attack exploited instances where MFA was not enforced during the process of registering a new device with a company's instance of Microsoft's identity service, Azure Active Directory (<a href="#">Azure AD</a>); or when enrolling a BYOD device to a mobile device management (MDM) platform like Microsoft's Intune.</p> <p>"While multiple users within various organizations were compromised in the first wave, the attack did not progress past this stage for the majority of targets as they had MFA enabled. The attack's propagation heavily relied on a lack of MFA protocols," <a href="#">Microsoft said</a>.</p> <p>"Enabling MFA for Office 365 applications or while registering new devices could have disrupted the second stage of the attack chain," it added.</p> <p>The first wave of the attack targeted organizations in Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, according to Microsoft. "Hundreds" of credentials stolen in this phase were then used in the second phase where a device was registered or enrolled, allowing for broader penetration of the target.</p> <p>The first phase relied on a DocuSign-branded phishing email requesting the recipient review and sign the document. It used phishing domains registered under the .xyz top level domain (TLD). Each email's phishing link was also uniquely generated and contained the target's name in the URL. The phishing link directed victims to a spoofed Office 365 login page.</p> <p>The attackers used stolen credentials to set up a connection with Exchange Online PowerShell and used this to create inbox rules that deleted messages based on keywords in the subject or body of the email, including 'junk', 'spam', 'phishing', 'hacked', 'password', and 'with you'. This was likely to avoid detection.</p> <p>In the second phase, the attackers installed Microsoft's Outlook email client on to their own Windows 10 PC, which was then successfully connected to the victim's Azure AD. All the attackers had to do was accept Outlook's onboarding experience that prompts the user to register a device. In this case, the attackers were using credentials acquired in phase one.</p> <p>"An Azure AD MFA policy would have halted the attack chain at this stage," Microsoft notes.</p> <p>Azure AD does have tools to mitigate these threats by time-stamping and logging new device registrations.</p> <p>But with compromised credentials and a registered Windows 10 device with Outlook, the attackers could then launch the second phase, which involved sending "lateral, internal, and outbound" phishing messages to over 8,500 other email accounts. These messages used a SharePoint invitation to view a "Payment.pdf" file.</p>

"By using a device now recognized as part of the domain coupled with a mail client configured exactly like any regular user, the attacker gained the ability to send intra-organizational emails that were missing many of the typical suspect identifiers. By removing enough of these suspicious message elements, the attacker thereby significantly expanded the success of the phishing campaign."

Accounts where victims clicked the link in the second wave were similarly subjected to automated rules that deleted emails containing the same keywords used in the first wave.

Microsoft offers directions to security teams that can revoke active sessions and tokens of compromised accounts, delete unwanted mailbox rules, and disable rogue devices registered with Azure AD.

Notably, Microsoft says organizations can reduce their attack surface by disabling "[basic authentication](#)", and in Exchange Online and by disabling Exchange Online Powershell for end users. Admins can also enable [Microsoft's new "conditional access control"](#).

Microsoft in February [announced that](#), due to the pandemic, it was delaying its plan to turn off basic authentication in Exchange Online for legacy email authentication protocols, such as Exchange Web Services (EWS), Exchange ActiveSync (EAS), POP, IMAP, Remote PowerShell, MAPI, RPC, SMTP AUTH, and OAB.

That move would eliminate instances where single factor authentication is used. Microsoft's replacement for basic authentication, dubbed Modern Authentication, enables both conditional access and MFA.

Microsoft in September [said](#) it would "begin to permanently disable Basic Auth in all tenants, regardless of usage, with the exception of SMTP Auth", from October 1, 2022.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Ransom gangs target breached individuals</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://blog.malwarebytes.com/ransomware/2022/01/ransomware-gangs-are-recruiting-breached-individuals-to-persuade-companies-to-pay-up/?web_view=true">https://blog.malwarebytes.com/ransomware/2022/01/ransomware-gangs-are-recruiting-breached-individuals-to-persuade-companies-to-pay-up/?web_view=true</a>
GIST	<p>You've heard about ransomware, where attackers lock up your files and demand a payment for the decryption key. You may also have heard about ransomware attackers not only locking up your files, but also threatening to release the stolen data in an attempt to get you to pay up.</p> <p>What you may not have heard about is a relatively new tactic that ransomware attackers are using. Recent reports say attackers are using the stolen data to contact individuals (by social media, email or phone) that have been compromised in the attack.</p> <p>Ransomware groups are using these direct contact tactics as extra leverage for victims to pay up. They contact staff or customers whose data was exfiltrated in the attack and get them to persuade the victim to pay up, threatening with the release of their personal information if they don't.</p> <p>Earlier this week, <a href="#">NBC news published a story</a> about a parent of a child who attended a school overseen by a district that was the victim of a ransomware attack. The attackers emailed the parent and asked him to put pressure on the district to pay up or all the exfiltrated files, including information on him and his son, would be released on the dark web.</p> <p>Allen School District</p> <p>Ransomware attackers are always looking for low-hanging fruit. And schools have always been easy targets for ransomware, because of their limited budgets, especially for security. All of which was made worse by the demand for distance learning created by the Coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>In September 2021, Allen ISD was hit with a cyberattack, and later the subject of an attempted extortion by the culprits. Allen ISD serves nearly 22,000 K-12 students about 30 miles north of Dallas, Texas.</p>

After consulting external cybersecurity experts, the school officials decide to refuse to pay the hackers' demands, and even told local media there was no evidence that data had been exfiltrated. That's despite the fact that the ransomware group said it had obtained personal information from district students, families and staff and attempted to extort Allen ISD out of millions of dollars.

Often, cybercriminals will follow the media coverage about how the incident is being portrayed and if they feel like the victim is not truthful, or misrepresents the situation, they have been known to escalate.

#### Personal contact

According to the person interviewed by NBC, the district did not tell parents or many staff that they had fallen victim to an attack, at least not before the contact was made by the attackers themselves.

The attackers use whatever contact information they can find, such as employee directories or customer databases, to identify individuals they can pressure. Learning about such an incident from the mouth of the attacker can be extra scary for those that had no clue whatsoever.

#### Enlist insiders

Another tactic that ransomware attackers use is to contact workers at a company in the reconnaissance stages of an attack to see if they can skip the infiltration stages by using an [insider threat](#).

A [new poll from identity protection company Hitachi ID Systems](#) found that 65% of surveyed IT and security executives or their employees have been approached to assist in ransomware cyberattacks. This represents a 17% increase from a similar survey that was done a year earlier. In most cases, the attackers used email and social media to contact employees, but 27% of their approach efforts were conducted via phone calls, a direct and brazen means of contact.

Many ransomware gangs operate as a Ransomware-as-a-Service, which consists of a core group of developers, who maintain the ransomware and payment sites, and recruited affiliates who breach victims' networks and encrypt devices. Using an insider threat, the developers can save splitting the money with the affiliates, or an affiliate can hand over an accomplished breach without having to use any complicated tools or skip the part of going through failed attempts with the chance of getting detected.

A prime example of this is [LockBit](#) which has been known to change the Windows wallpaper placed on encrypted devices to offer "millions of dollars" for corporate insiders who provide access to other networks where they have an account.

#### Insider risk mitigation

For those that are worried by the thought of possible insider threats, the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has created an [insider risk self-assessment tool](#), with which owners and operators or organizations, especially small and mid-sized ones who may not have in-house security departments, can gauge their vulnerability to an insider threat incident.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 No 911? Sheriff halts Facebook comments</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/fearing-tips-lost-sheriff-halts-facebook-comments-82512225">https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/fearing-tips-lost-sheriff-halts-facebook-comments-82512225</a>
GIST	<p>NEW PORT RICHEY, Fla. -- A Florida sheriff's office has turned off public comments on its social media posts because authorities said too many people are reporting crimes there rather than calling 911 or submitting tips through the agency's website.</p> <p>The Pasco County Sheriff's Office has for years maintained popular accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, capitalizing on the popularity it gained from the A&amp;E show "Live PD" and securing a copyright for the hashtag #9pmroutine, which is a nightly reminder for people to lock up their cars and houses, the Tampa Bay Times reported.</p>

	<p>The agency has some 300,000 followers on Facebook and about 131,000 on Twitter, in a county with 583,000 residents.</p> <p>In a Facebook post on Monday, Sheriff Chris Nocco said they will no longer allow public comment out of fear that the agency could miss “life-or-death” information.</p> <p>“Social media was not designed for that purpose,” Sheriff Chris Nocco said the in the post. “To be clear, this was not a decision we take lightly.”</p> <p>The change was prompted after his three-member public information team began posting more social media notices about missing persons and runaway teens, Nocco said. These posts drew overwhelming comments from people reporting crimes and leaving tips in social media threads.</p> <p>“However, with the continued growth in our county and the need to continue to provide resources to serve our growing population, there was not a possibility to hire the people that would be required to monitor our social media platforms on a consistent, 24/7 basis for 365 days a year,” he said.</p> <p>Some criticized the decision before the comments were cut off, according to the Tampa Bay Times.</p> <p>“If people weren’t comfortable using the other formats to leave tips before, they won’t be comfortable with it now. It will just leave you with less tips,” one user wrote.</p> <p>“It’s almost like you want to discourage people from providing information,” another user wrote.</p> <p>The sheriff also noted the “unfortunate growth in negative and hurtful comments, especially directed to runaways.”</p> <p>He said that these kinds of comments can be “hurtful to those individuals and their families who are often looking for needed assistance.”</p> <p>“Imagine, just for a moment, if that was your loved one that had gone missing and you are desperate to find them but, instead of seeing help, you see commentary asking about their upbringing, their looks or the type of picture that was provided to law enforcement,” the sheriff wrote.</p> <p>While the social media platforms will be a one-way communication tool for now, spokeswoman Amanda Hunter told the Times they’ll also provide breaking news updates through a new blog-style website — <a href="http://news.pascosheriff.com">news.pascosheriff.com</a>.</p> <p>And in an emergency, she notes, the public should always call 911 for assistance.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Vandals rip businesses internet, phones</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/internet-vandalism-magnolia/281-be864d2a-6369-4ff9-b621-21112a8b729d">https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/internet-vandalism-magnolia/281-be864d2a-6369-4ff9-b621-21112a8b729d</a>
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Damaged copper and fiber wires under the Magnolia Bridge that caused internet and phone service issues for around 1,300 customers could still take days to weeks to fix, a spokesperson for Lumen Technologies said Thursday.</p> <p>The company says someone stole and vandalized wire on Jan. 20, and once repairs were complete, hit the site again. It released this statement on Jan. 27:</p> <p><i>"Lumen techs have been working long hours to restore services for our customers affected by the theft of the fiber and copper wiring under the Magnolia bridge late last week."</i></p>



*"Our team has successfully restored internet and voice service to more than 550 customers out of the approximately 1300 who were part of the outage. Additionally, we currently have 600 voice and 150 internet customers who remain without service.*

*"Unfortunately, the restoration is taking longer than normal due to the extent of the damage caused by the vandals. We are repairing more connections daily and expect full restoration for all customers in 2 to 3 weeks. We greatly appreciate the patience of the Magnolia community as we work through this issue. We will continue to keep our customers and community updated on our progress."*

The outage meant disruptions for local businesses like Niko's Gyros on 32nd Avenue West, where Alexandra Serpanos said phone service out for days meant no phone-in to-go orders or credit card charges, a hit she believes cost them thousands.

"We depend on the phone and the majority of our customers do use a credit card of some sort so that was disabling us. It was choking our business since Thursday when there was neither phone lines nor internet," Serpanos said.

She said after days without service, her longtime credit card processor, PridePays, came by with a hotspot and helped get her temporarily up and running.

"Margins on restaurants are small and tight as it is, so we were very fortunate to get up and running yesterday," Serpanos said.

[Return to Top](#)

## Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 ISIS wannabe jail sentence reduced
SOURCE	<a href="https://sfist.com/2022/01/27/west-oakland-isis-wannabe-gets-sentence-reduced-after-terrorism-charges-dropped/">https://sfist.com/2022/01/27/west-oakland-isis-wannabe-gets-sentence-reduced-after-terrorism-charges-dropped/</a>
GIST	<p>An East Bay man who'd tried to get recruited by ISIS in 2016, but was dealing with undercover FBI instead, had his sentence reduced from 16 years to seven years, after an appeals court decided that his Twitter threats did not constitute actual terrorism.</p> <p>A fun San Francisco legal fact is that Supreme Court justice Stephen Breyer, who <a href="#">announced his retirement</a> from the high court yesterday, has a brother who's a U.S. District Court judge right here in San Francisco. We bring this up because both San Francisco natives are in the news today, for entirely separate reasons; Stephen Breyer for his retirement, and Charles Breyer because the Bay Area News Group reports he <a href="#">reduced a prison sentence from 16 years to seven years</a> for accused Oakland domestic terrorist Amer Sinan Al Haggagi, after an appeals court ruled that Al Haggagi's threats to kill 10,000 people were merely Twitter trolling that he did not intend to carry out.</p> <p>The details of Al Haggagi's case, which <a href="#">we learned in 2017</a>, were that he wanted to join ISIS and <a href="#">start wildfires, sell poisoned cocaine, and blow up gay nightclubs</a>. What he did not realize was that was not working with ISIS, but with undercover FBI agents. As he texted one of them in July 2016, "I'm going to place a bomb in a gay club. ...I'm going to tear up the city. ...The whole Bay Area is going to be up in flames. My ideas are genius. LMAO."</p> <p>It was not Judge Breyer's desire to reduce the sentence, but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals threw out the terrorism charge that Breyer <a href="#">sentenced him with in 2019</a>, leaving Breyer no choice but to reduce the sentence. "I would say that everybody got lucky that, one, he engaged with an FBI agent and, two, that he didn't engage with a second person who could have carried out some of the things that he wanted to do," Breyer said Wednesday. "That's luck."</p>

	<p>Al Haggagi’s lawyer, unsurprisingly, thought the reduced sentence was the right call. “What he did here was to talk,” attorney Mary McNamara <a href="#">told NBC Bay Area</a>, “He talked about campaigns of terror, so to speak. They’re atrocious the things that he actually said, but he didn’t carry out any of them.”</p> <p>And Al Haggagi at least sounds penitent. “I just wanted to say that, no matter what I could never forgive myself for the pain and suffering that I’ve caused my family, and that I’ve been beating myself every day for that,” he told the court via phone from prison. “I was obnoxious, reckless, and without direction. I was an unprincipled and undisciplined young boy.”</p> <p>He’s been in jail since he was arrested in 2017, so the new reduced 81-month sentence could spring him out late next year. And he was only 22 at the time of the crimes, and is now entering his late 20s. So maybe he’s learned something and been humbled.</p> <p>Or maybe next time when he says he wants to kill 10,000 people, he’ll find collaborators who are not undercover FBI agents.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 France warns: imminent attack in Kenya</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://bnonews.com/index.php/2022/01/france-warns-of-imminent-terrorist-attack-in-kenya/">https://bnonews.com/index.php/2022/01/france-warns-of-imminent-terrorist-attack-in-kenya/</a>
GIST	<p>The French Embassy in Kenya has urged people to exercise “extreme vigilance” during the next few days, saying there’s a threat of an imminent terrorist attack against Westerners.</p> <p>“There’s a real risk of targeting public places frequented by foreign nationals (restaurants, hotels, leisure venues, shopping malls), in particular in Nairobi,” the French Embassy said in a statement on Thursday. Other details about the threat or the source of the intelligence were not immediately released.</p> <p>“People in Kenya are advised to exercise extreme vigilance and avoid frequenting these public places in the coming days, including this weekend,” the statement added.</p> <p>Maarten Brouwer, the Dutch Ambassador to Kenya, said his French colleagues had informed his embassy about the threat. “The information is being assessed as credible,” he said.</p> <p>“Of course we all hope that this threat turns out to be a false alarm, but nonetheless we want to share this information with you so you can take your own precautions,” Brouwer said in a letter. “The information is, as usual, not specific: the time and place of the attack are unknown.”</p> <p>Kenya has experienced a number of attacks over the years, many of which were carried out by the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, which is based in neighboring Somalia.</p> <p>In January 2019, gunmen and suicide bombers attacked a hotel and commercial complex in the Kenyan capital, killing at least 21 people, including two foreigners. And in 2013, gunmen attacked the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, killing 67 people, including 19 foreigners, and injuring nearly 200.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Afghan evacuee camp costs: who pays?</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/wisconsin-community-hosting-afghan-evacuee-camp-ge/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/wisconsin-community-hosting-afghan-evacuee-camp-ge/</a>
GIST	<p>It turns out that adding 13,000 Afghan evacuees — a small city’s worth of people — to a local community can stress things out a bit.</p> <p>For one thing, there’s the trash. A lot more of it.</p> <p>At Fort McCoy in Wisconsin, where 13,000 evacuees were held for months, the foam containers used to serve three meals a day added tons of trash to Monroe County’s landfill, said Cedric Schnitzler, chairman of the county Board of Supervisors. The eight to 10 additional truckloads each week mean the landfill will reach capacity “significantly quicker” than the county had planned.</p>

And then there's the revenue.

Local officials said federal officials can make purchases tax-free, which means diapers and baby formula bought off the shelves to supply the families didn't net the locals anything.

That also goes for the local occupancy tax. Sparta, the biggest city in Monroe County, had to dip into its reserves to make up for the lost revenue, Mr. Schnitzler said.

"I would never say that it's been a burden as far as to Monroe County. It's definitely challenging, but as a county, county government, at least in Wisconsin, is all about service," Mr. Schnitzler told The Washington Times.

Now the question is who's going to pay.

Rep. Thomas P. Tiffany said the federal government should cover the costs it created.

"The Biden administration is taking advantage of the good faith and the goodwill of people like in Monroe County," the Wisconsin Republican told The Times. "These people are going to do the very best they can, and the people in the Biden administration know that. They took advantage of that good faith effort they knew would happen."

Fort McCoy is one of eight military bases in the U.S. where the Biden administration deposited some 76,000 evacuees after the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August.

As of this week, more than 66,000 had been processed and resettled in communities. The remaining 9,000 or so are at three bases. In addition to Fort McCoy, they are Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey and Fort Pickett in Virginia.

Camps at five locations were shut down after all of the Afghans there were processed: Fort Bliss, Texas; Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico; Camp Atterbury, Indiana; and Quantico Marine Corps Base and Fort Lee in Virginia.

Resettlement efforts have been tricky. Some analysts suggest things were tougher than anticipated because the Biden administration botched the withdrawal by evacuating the wrong people.

Billed as an airlift for those who helped American troops in the 20-year war effort, the evacuation instead mostly brought out people who were able to make it to the airport as Kabul fell to the Taliban. U.S. resettlement experts, who had been preparing for English-speaking translators, suddenly found themselves grappling with shopkeepers and professionals who didn't speak English, making the transition to American life more complicated.

There have also been reports of Afghans walking off the bases and disappearing into communities.

The entire airlift operation was established quickly, and local officials were left scrambling to figure out how they could help and what would be asked of them.

As one measure of the chaos, Fort McCoy initially said its capacity to house evacuees was 10,000. Days later, the Biden administration ordered it to take 13,000.

For a county with a population of 45,000 — and whose biggest cities top out at 10,000 people — it was a major lift.

Mr. Schnitzler said they initially treated the news of the coming evacuees as a security question. Then they quickly realized health officials needed to figure out how to get more vaccines, social services folks would

have to be ready to sign up evacuees for income support or the state's BadgerCare health care program, and the medical examiner needed to be on call for any deaths.

Absorbing the impact was likely easier in places like Burlington County in New Jersey, where 11,000 evacuees at McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst were less of a shock among the county's 450,000 residents.

But Nottoway County in Virginia — population of about 15,000, hosts Fort Pickett, which peaked at about 6,000 evacuees. Nottoway officials didn't respond to inquiries for this article.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees Operation Allies Welcome, said communities have been critical to the effort's success.

"Operation Allies Welcome has made incredible progress over the last five months, and we are thankful for the support that veterans, faith groups, and people across the country have shown our Afghan allies as they join their new communities," the department said in a statement to The Times.

Homeland Security said weekly meetings are held with community leaders to address developments and any concerns the locals raise.

Whether the Biden administration is open to a conversation about recompense is not clear. Officials said it was a question for the White House budget office, which didn't respond to an inquiry for this report.

All sides agree that the military people running the bases where camps were set up have been professional with handling the situation.

"The people that were in charge there were doing yeoman's work," Mr. Tiffany said.

Still, he said, the federal government must pick up the tab for the impact on local communities.

Monroe County Administrator Tina Osterberg said they are still tallying the lost revenue and extra landfill impact.

"At this time, Monroe County has had some meetings informing officials that we have had fiscal impacts, but we do not have a clear picture of the totality of these impacts," she said in an email.

Fort McCoy said it took steps to alleviate the landfill situation. It donated machines to help compact the additional waste and started working on a contract to send trash to a power-generating station instead of the county landfill.

Mr. Tiffany said he hopes the federal government comes up with cash for communities that have hosted evacuee camps. He said it should happen before the Biden administration releases millions of dollars in assistance for Afghanistan.

That money was halted when the Taliban took control, but the administration recently said it would unfreeze the money.

"What I'm saying to the Biden administration at this point is, 'Just take a little bit of that money and give it to Monroe County and make it whole before you send it to Afghanistan,'" Mr. Tiffany said.

Trash and money are visible effects, but officials said communities have had to figure out a lot of things with evacuees, such as dealing with measles outbreaks. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a nationwide alert last year for clinicians to also be on the lookout for mumps, malaria and leishmaniasis cases among evacuees.

There have also been some criminal entanglements, with scattered reports of robbery, theft, assault and even child molestation.

	<p>A 24-year-old Afghan evacuee housed at Quantico was convicted this week of sexual assault. Marines at the camp said they saw him kissing and groping a girl through her clothes, all over her body. She tried to push him away, but he pulled her back.</p> <p>A Marine investigator said Mohammed Tariq described his behavior as “really normal” in his culture, according to court documents.</p> <p>Military officials say the overall rates of reported criminal activity were lower than what would be expected in the general U.S. population.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/27 ISIS beaten? Not yet, fighting still in prison</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/middleeast/syria-isis-prison.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/middleeast/syria-isis-prison.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>HASAKA, Syria — Forces from a Kurdish-led militia traded fire from the rooftops with dozens of Islamic State fighters still holed up in an embattled prison in northeastern Syria on Thursday, despite claims by the U.S.-backed militia a day earlier that it had regained full control of the entire complex.</p> <p>The Syrian Democratic Forces militia announced Wednesday that it had retaken Sinaa prison in the city of Hasaka, which held thousands of former ISIS fighters, nearly a week after their fellow militants attacked the prison to try to free them.</p> <p>But when New York Times journalists arrived Thursday, the first international reporters on the scene, the fight was still on.</p> <p>The Kurdish-led forces fired rocket-propelled grenades at the partly destroyed prison complex, and the sound of truck-mounted antiaircraft guns rang out as they confronted up to 90 ISIS militants still fighting from inside. An official with one of the Syrian Kurdish paramilitary groups battling ISIS said most of the holdouts were among those who stormed the prison, but some were prisoners who had joined forces with them.</p> <p>The prison attack was the starkest evidence yet of a resurgence of ISIS across parts of Syria and Iraq, nearly three years after the group lost control of its so-called caliphate, a vast stretch of territory in both countries. The extremists have also mounted a series of attacks on military forces in neighboring Iraq in recent months.</p> <p>The prison battle drew the U.S. military into the fray in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces, or the S.D.F., providing airstrikes, intelligence and armored vehicles to cordon off the prison. It was the biggest confrontation between American forces and ISIS in three years.</p> <p>Fighting on Thursday also raged in areas surrounding the prison complex.</p> <p>At a nearby traffic circle in the center of Hasaka, a New York Times team took cover along with local journalists and civilians caught in the middle as S.D.F. forces traded fire with ISIS gunmen. The firefight broke out close to a small U.S. Army base housing some of the roughly 700 U.S. troops in northeastern Syria.</p> <p>The S.D.F. said two ISIS fighters were killed in the engagement near the traffic circle, but there were no reports of civilians harmed in that clash.</p> <p>S.D.F. officials did not respond to queries about their assertion on Wednesday that the force had fully retaken the prison. On Thursday, an official said that the remaining ISIS fighters were holed up in different sections of one of the prison’s three buildings.</p> <p>In a neighborhood nearby, hundreds of Kurdish special forces fanned out, going house to house to search for escaped prisoners and ISIS fighters in hiding.</p>

Down an alley, special forces operators lined up young men from some of the houses near a wall as they examined their documents. They instructed residents to come out of their homes. Leave the doors open, they said over loudspeakers, or they would use force to open them.

The neighborhood was mostly empty.

The United Nations children's agency, UNICEF, said the fighting had forced 45,000 people in this city of one million to flee their homes, most of them women and children. Some have gone to stay with relatives while others ended up in shelters in the city.

In one house, a young mother emerged with two boys, wide-eyed and terrified. The woman, Nasreen, who asked to be identified by her first name only out of fear for her security, said she was trying to keep them warm by borrowing fuel from the neighbor. She said the water had been cut off for the past 10 days.

Asked why she had stayed home when most of her neighbors had left, she replied, "We have nowhere else to go."

Next to the prison complex, a bulldozer emerged from the ruins of a cultural center next to the prison complex carrying the crumpled body of an ISIS fighter before dumping it in the back of a pickup truck. Across the street at least four blackened oil tankers lay on their sides, hit by what S.D.F. forces said was an airstrike on nearby buildings by the U.S.-led military coalition against ISIS. One was still burning.

At another building behind the cultural center, which had been hit by an airstrike, S.D.F. fighters pulled out the remains of two other ISIS fighters from the twisted metal and rubble.

An S.D.F. spokesman said Wednesday that at least 30 militia fighters and more than 100 militants had been killed. The final tally is expected to be considerably higher.

The fate of some 700 boys, who the S.D.F. said were used as human shields by the ISIS attackers, was still not completely clear. The boys, aged 10 to 18, have been held for three years in the prison because their parents had joined the Islamic State. Some may have been recruited by ISIS as child fighters.

A senior S.D.F. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the boys had been in a separate building but got mixed up with the adult prisoners during the siege, and that some were given arms and "pushed into clashes."

The boys who have been recaptured or surrendered have been resegregated from the adult prisoners, the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Siyamend Ali, the head of media for the People's Protection Units, one of the Kurdish factions in the S.D.F., said he was not aware that any of the child hostages had been killed in the fighting but that information about what happened to all of the prisoners was still being assessed.

He said that more than 3,000 detainees had surrendered and that most had been taken to a new detention facility built by the U.S.-led coalition that has fought the Islamic State in Syria. Some of the ISIS militants still inside the prison were believed to be foreign fighters, he added.

"The prison attack has activated sleeper cells in other places," he said.

Residents of the neighborhoods near the prison have fled or were forced by security forces to leave after ISIS attacked the complex last Thursday with suicide bombers and gunmen. A week later, dozens of families gathered at a security checkpoint less than a mile from their homes, prevented by security forces from returning because of the continuing danger.



“If you listen to me, you will go back!” a female intelligence officer wearing military fatigues and a pink-flowered headband shouted at a group of women asking to be allowed to go home. Fighter jets flew overhead as the families sat on the concrete curb, hoping the road would open. Some carried plastic bags with flat loaves of bread, a staple that is increasingly hard to come by in those parts, hoping to take them back home.

Fatma Naser, 25, said that she and her three small children had been staying with relatives and that she was desperate to get back to her own home.

Her daughter, Maria, clutched a cheap plastic doll wearing a black homemade dress with rough yellow stitching whose arm was hanging off.

“I’m already dead,” said Ftem Awad al-Jamil, an older woman with deep wrinkles and tribal tattoos on her face who said she did not know her age. Ms. Jamil, who wore a torn dark purple scarf held together by safety pins, said she had walked from a neighborhood on the outskirts of town with her daughters and grandsons hoping to get home.

“We left because we were afraid,” she said. “We were sleeping and ISIS entered the neighborhood.”

She said ISIS fighters had beheaded two of their neighbors, including a police officer, after the prison takeover. S.D.F. forces confirmed that ISIS fighters beheaded two people.

Ms. al-Jamil said the ISIS fighters were outsiders.

“It wasn’t the ones from the prison who came to us,” she said. “They are weak. It was the ones who came to us from the desert.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Military told to protect civilians from harm</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/politics/us-airstrikes-rand-report.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/us/politics/us-airstrikes-rand-report.html</a>
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III ordered the military on Thursday to strengthen its efforts to prevent civilian deaths and to improve the way it investigates and acknowledges claims of civilian harm in U.S. combat operations.</p> <p>In his most sweeping statement on the issue to date, Mr. Austin set in motion a series of measures that military officials say are intended to change how commanders in the field think about their jobs, fostering a culture in which they view preventing civilian harm as a core part of their missions.</p> <p>“We can and will improve upon efforts to protect civilians,” Mr. Austin said in a two-page directive to top civilian and military officials, a copy of which was obtained by The New York Times. “The protection of innocent civilians in the conduct of our operations remains vital to the ultimate success of our operations, and as a significant strategic and moral imperative.”</p> <p>The move comes after a series of Times investigations into airstrikes that killed civilians, including the <a href="#">cover-up of a strike in Syria in 2019</a> that killed dozens of women and children and a <a href="#">botched drone strike in Kabul</a>, Afghanistan, that killed 10 innocent people in August. Another <a href="#">Times investigation based on a trove of Pentagon reviews</a> of strikes revealed systemic failures to prevent civilian deaths in its air war against the Islamic State.</p> <p>Mr. Austin, a former four-star Army general with combat experience, <a href="#">pledged in November to overhaul military procedures</a> and hold top officers responsible for carrying out changes. In his memo, he ordered a standardized reporting process on civilian harm, the creation of a military “center of excellence” and the completion of a comprehensive <a href="#">new policy on the issue that has been in the works</a> for nearly two years.</p> <p>Mr. Austin’s directive also follows recently imposed <a href="#">congressional restrictions on some military funds</a> until the Pentagon has submitted that civilian casualty policy. It also comes on the same day that</p>

RAND Corporation published a congressionally mandated report evaluating the military's processes and procedures on civilian casualties. Congress has been briefed on the directive.

The RAND report, obtained by The Times, found "considerable weaknesses" in the military's approach to evaluating the deaths and injuries of innocents, most notably deficiencies in carrying out investigations and identifying root causes or lessons that could allow the military to better prevent civilian harm.

In interviews, several members of the military who witnessed civilian casualties said that they repeatedly filed formal reports to the authorities but never received any response, and that airstrike teams rarely spoke about how to avoid future accidents. One Air Force officer said this week that the reports seemed to "disappear into the ether."

The memo does not state whether longstanding [calls for the military to investigate civilian harm](#) on the ground will be a part of the center's work, nor does it answer questions about whether the military should grade itself.

Against that backdrop, it remains unclear whether Mr. Austin's effort will transform the [military's ability to monitor and restrain itself](#), in part because the Pentagon has already said that it tries to avoid and mitigate civilian harm.

For example, the U.S. military has long been taught that the laws of war prevent intentionally targeting civilians or carrying out strikes where the anticipated scale of bystander deaths is disproportionate to the combat aim. Military leaders and presidents have long [articulated a policy](#) of minimizing or trying to prevent collateral damage.

In recent years, a number of military officials said, loopholes in the regulations routinely allowed Special Operations forces to sidestep safeguards.

But Mr. Austin and his senior advisers declared an intention to overhaul policy rules and cultural norms in the military in a meaningful way. The challenge facing them is whether they can translate their abstract intentions into concrete change in the field.

To that end, Mr. Austin's memo directs Pentagon officials to take immediate action on some matters, like the establishment of a standardized system for reports of civilian harm and the creation of the Pentagon center that would focus on how to prevent, mitigate and respond to civilian harm.

The defense secretary also gave officials 90 days to develop a so-called Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan to carry out recommendations from recently completed Pentagon-commissioned studies, including the report from RAND, an inspector general's inquiry into the drone strike in Kabul and a review of the 2019 airstrike in Syria.

The memo does not say who will oversee that effort. But a person familiar with the matter said it was being assigned to Christopher P. Maier, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict.

The decision to assign the task to someone on the operational side, rather than to Pentagon officials who typically focus on humanitarian concerns, is said to be a subtle reflection of Mr. Austin's determination that fighters in the field will take seriously ideas that emerge from the new effort to mitigate civilian harm.

Then, within 180 days of the memo — leaving three months to incorporate the policy plans Mr. Maier will develop — Mr. Austin directed the Pentagon to complete a broad, new policy on mitigating civilian harm that has been under development for more than two years. Known as an "instruction," it will lock down the changes as Pentagon doctrine.

“It will adopt a comprehensive approach, reinforcing that D.O.D.’s efforts to protect civilians are the responsibility of all leaders throughout the department, always, and not only that of our commanders and personnel in the field,” Mr. Austin said.

While the memo is sparse on details, a person familiar with the internal deliberations that led to it said the intention was not limited to making changes in the context of war zone and counterterrorism strikes using drones and other aircraft, which have led to high-profile instances of civilian deaths in recent years.

With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Somalia and the drawdown of troops in Iraq and Syria, the frequency and relative importance of such strikes is expected to diminish.

Rather, the person said, the policy goal is more ambitious and future oriented: to also incorporate new thinking about civilian protections across the entire range of military activities — including emerging realms like offensive hacking and space — where disabling infrastructure like power grids or satellites could harm civilians in myriad ways, and so-called “information” operations or propaganda.

Mr. Austin’s memo contained veiled hints of the project’s forward-looking scope.

“We will revisit the ways in which we assess incidents that may have resulted in civilian harm, acknowledge the harm to civilians that resulted from such incidents, and incorporate lessons learned into the planning and execution of future combat operations and into our tactics, techniques and procedures,” it said.

A Times investigation based on the military’s confidential assessments of [more than 1,300 reports of civilian casualties](#) and ground reporting at the sites of more than 100 civilian casualty sites showed that the air campaign against the Islamic State was marked by flawed intelligence, [confirmation bias](#) and scant accountability.

In the deadly [drone strike in Kabul](#), during the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, nearly everything that senior Pentagon officials claimed in the hours, days and weeks after the attack turned out to be wrong. A week after a Times video investigation showed that the man driving the car was an aid worker, the Pentagon acknowledged that the strike had been a tragic mistake and that no [Islamic State Khorasan](#) fighters had been killed.

The [inquiry in the Kabul strike](#) by the Air Force’s inspector general, Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said, blamed “confirmation bias” for warping operators’ interpretation of what they were seeing. The inquiry made several recommendations for fixing the process through which strikes are ordered, including putting in new measures to cut down the risk of confirmation bias and reviewing the prestrike procedures used to assess the presence of civilians.

In November, [Mr. Austin promised to revamp military procedures](#) and hold top officers responsible for civilian harm. But he did not outline any systemic problems that had allowed those casualties to persist on battlefields in Syria and Afghanistan.

And two weeks later, after a [New York Times investigation](#) described allegations that top officers and civilian officials had sought to conceal casualties from a U.S. airstrike in Syria in 2019 that killed dozens of women and children, Mr. Austin ordered a high-level investigation into the matter.

The attack, by a shadowy Special Operations unit called Task Force 9, took place near the Syrian town of Baghuz on March 18, 2019. It was among the largest episodes of civilian casualties in the yearslong war against the Islamic State, but the U.S. military had never publicly acknowledged it.

The investigation, by Gen. Michael X. Garrett, the four-star head of the Army’s Forces Command, is examining the strike and the military’s initial inquiries into it, Pentagon officials said.

	<p>Several of the steps in Mr. Austin’s memo include recommendations raised in the RAND report. Many of the findings echo other recent reviews of civilian casualties, which also found problems with the post-strike assessment process.</p> <p>An April 2018 <a href="#">Joint Chiefs of Staff review</a> found that “feedback to subordinate commands on the cause and/or lessons learned from a civilian casualty incident is inconsistent.” A <a href="#">May 2021 report</a> from the Pentagon inspector general also raised problems with post-strike assessments.</p> <p>“The fact that civilian harm is being recognized as a priority at the highest levels of the department is a positive and welcome step,” said Annie Shiel, a senior adviser for the Center for Civilians in Conflict. “But the impact will depend entirely on results.”</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Kurdish-led militia still fighting IS in prison</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/middleeast/syria-isis-prison.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/middleeast/syria-isis-prison.html</a>
GIST	<p>HASAKA, Syria — Forces from a Kurdish-led militia on rooftops traded fire with dozens of Islamic State fighters still holed up in an embattled prison in northeastern Syria on Thursday, despite claims by the U.S.-backed militia a day earlier that it had <a href="#">regained full control of the entire complex</a>.</p> <p>The militia, the Syrian Democratic Forces, claimed on Wednesday that it had retaken <a href="#">the prison</a>, Sinaa, in the city of Hasaka, which housed thousands of Islamic State former fighters. <a href="#">Their fellow militants attacked a week ago</a> in an attempt to free them.</p> <p>But on Thursday, there was still fighting at the partly destroyed prison complex, and an official with one of the Syrian-Kurdish paramilitary groups battling ISIS said 60 to 90 militants from the group were still fighting from inside. Most of the holdouts are attackers who had stormed the prison, but some of them were prisoners who had joined forces with them, the official said.</p> <p>The prison attack was the starkest evidence yet of a <a href="#">resurgence of ISIS</a> across parts of Syria and Iraq, nearly three years after the group lost control of a vast stretch of both countries. The extremists have also mounted a series of attacks on military forces in neighboring Iraq in recent months.</p> <p>The fight drew the U.S. military into the fray in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces, or the S.D.F., providing airstrikes, intelligence and armored vehicles to cordon off the prison. This was the broadest confrontation between American forces and ISIS since the end of the group’s so-called caliphate.</p> <p><a href="#">The fate of some 700 boys</a> — who have been held for years in the prison because their parents joined the Islamic State and whom the S.D.F. claimed the ISIS attackers were holding as human shields — was still not completely clear.</p> <p>Siyamend Ali, the head of media for the People’s Protection Units, one of the Kurdish factions in the S.D.F., said he was not aware that any of the child hostages had been killed in the fighting but that information about what happened to all of the prisoners was still being assessed.</p> <p>He said more than 3,000 detainees had surrendered and most had been taken to a new detention facility built by the U.S.-led coalition that has fought the Islamic State in Syria. Some of the ISIS militants still inside the prison were believed to be foreign fighters, he added.</p> <p>“The prison attack has activated sleeper cells in other places,” Mr. Ali said.</p> <p>The fighting on Thursday was also raging in areas surrounding the prison complex.</p> <p>At a traffic circle a few hundred yards from the prison complex in the center of Hasaka, a New York Times team took cover along with a group of local journalists and civilians caught in the middle as Kurdish-led forces traded fire with ISIS gunmen who had opened fire from a street near the prison. The</p>

firefight broke out close to a small U.S. Army base housing some of the roughly [700 U.S. troops based in northeastern Syria](#).

Explosions from rocket-propelled grenades fired by the Kurdish-led forces at the prison and the sound of truck-mounted antiaircraft guns rang out.

The S.D.F. said two ISIS fighters were killed in the engagement near the traffic circle, but there were no reports of civilians harmed in that clash.

A bulldozer emerged from the ruins of a cultural center next to the prison complex carrying the crumpled body of an ISIS fighter before dumping it in the back of a pickup truck.

At another building behind the cultural center, which had been hit by an airstrike, S.D.F. fighters pulled out the remains of two other ISIS fighters. A charred oil tanker on its side still burned across the street.

S.D.F. forces said the tanker and three others that were burned beside it had been destroyed in an airstrike by the U.S.-led coalition operating in Syria.

Many residents of the neighborhoods near the prison have fled or were forced by security forces to leave after [ISIS attacked the complex last Thursday](#) with suicide bombers and gunmen. A week later, dozens of families gathered at a security checkpoint less than a mile from their homes, prevented by security forces from returning because of the continuing danger.

“If you listen to me, you will go back!” a female intelligence officer wearing military fatigues and a pink-flowered headband shouted at a group of women asking to be allowed to go home. Fighter jets flew overhead as the families sat on the concrete curb, hoping the road would open. Some carried plastic bags with flat loaves of bread, a staple that is increasingly hard to come by in those parts, hoping to take them back home.

Fatma Naser, 25, said that she and her three small children had been staying with relatives and that she was desperate to get back to her own home.

Her daughter, Maria, clutched a cheap plastic doll wearing a black dress with rough yellow stitching whose arm was hanging off.

“I’m already dead,” said Ftem Awad al-Jamil, an older woman who said she did not know her age. Ms. Jamil, who wore a torn dark purple scarf held together by safety pins, said she had walked from a neighborhood on the outskirts of town with her daughters and grandsons hoping to get home.

Ms. Jamil said one of her neighbors, a police officer, was killed by ISIS fighters last week when they broke into his home.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Denmark pulls troops out of Mali</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/european-force-deeply-regrets-mali-telling-danes-leave-82505179">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/european-force-deeply-regrets-mali-telling-danes-leave-82505179</a>
GIST	<p>COPENHAGEN, Denmark -- Denmark will pull its small military force out of northern Mali after the West African country's transitional government said no permission had been given for them to deploy there, the Danish foreign minister said Thursday.</p> <p>The government in Bamako, under coup leader Col. Assimi Goita, on Wednesday told Denmark to withdraw its 90-person contingent, which arrived in Mali just a week earlier for a one-year deployment under a European counterterrorism operation.</p>

Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod announced the pullout Thursday, following a briefing of parliament's foreign policy committee. The minister didn't provide a timeline.

"Last night, the coup generals (in Mali) sent out a public statement where they reiterated that Denmark is not welcome," he said. "That we will not accept. We have therefore decided, after consultations in the foreign policy committee — and there is backing there — that we pull our troops out."

The Danish contingent includes special operations soldiers, a surgical team and support personnel.

Kofod also said Denmark will "continue the good and close cooperation with our European allies" and keep the pressure on Mali's rulers "to get democracy back, to create safety for the population in Mali, to fight the terror groups."

On Wednesday, the countries behind the 15-nation European Task Force Takuba that is in Mali on a counterterrorism operation said the Danish presence is legal, and called on Bamako "to respect the solid grounds on which our diplomatic and operational cooperation is based."

The statement expressed "deep regret" that Mali claimed the Danish deployment lacked a proper legal basis and consent from the Malian government.

The Danish Foreign Ministry earlier had said Mali's former president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, had requested in 2019 that Denmark send troops to join the Takuba effort. But less than a year later, Keita was deposed in a military coup.

The ministry said the Danish contribution also had been approved by the current transitional government led by Goita.

Mali government spokesman Col. Abdoulaye Maiga said Wednesday that a Danish request to deploy troops had been under consideration but not approved.

"No agreement has authorized the deployment of Danish special forces as part of the Task Force Takuba," it said.

France plays a central role in the European force, and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on Thursday denounced "unfounded allegations" against Denmark, saying Mali's "junta is illegitimate and is taking irresponsible measures."

After seizing power in August 2020, Goita initially pledged to uphold Mali's international agreements but recently has shown signs of reluctance, at one point even temporarily grounding U.N. peacekeeping flights in the north.

Over the past 18 months, Goita has solidified his control, naming himself president of the government that was supposed to organize new democratic elections by the end of next month. Now Goita says that won't happen until 2026, prompting Mali's neighbors to impose punishing economic sanctions this month.

Mali has been battling an Islamic insurgency in the north since 2012, and former colonizer France led a military operation in 2013 to force the insurgents from power in the major towns of northern Mali.

France is increasingly concerned about what Le Drian called the deployment in Mali of hundreds of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, "with the only objective to protect a junta greedy for power."

Mali's interim government has accepted the presence of Wagner Group security contractors on its territory. Last month, the EU slapped sanctions on eight people and three oil companies linked to Wagner, which is accused of rights abuses in the Central African Republic, Libya and Syria.



HEADLINE	<b>01/28 Officials: 3 rockets hit near Baghdad airport</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iraqi-officials-rockets-hit-baghdad-airport-82527941">https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iraqi-officials-rockets-hit-baghdad-airport-82527941</a>
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD -- At least three rockets struck near Baghdad's international airport and an adjacent military base that hosts U.S. and other coalition advisors on Friday, damaging an abandoned commercial plane but causing no casualties, Iraqi officials said.</p> <p>The rockets struck in the early morning hours, and landed between the civilian and military areas of the airport, two security officials said on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the press.</p> <p>Iraqi Airways, the country's main carrier, said in a statement that the attack damaged one of its out of service planes parked near the airport but that operations were running normally and no delays were expected.</p> <p>The attack is the latest in a series of rocket and drone strikes that have targeted the American presence in Iraq since the start of the year, following the second anniversary of the U.S. strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassim Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.</p> <p>Pro-Iran Shiite factions in Iraq have vowed revenge for Soleimani's killing and have conditioned the end of the attacks on the full exit of American troops from the country.</p> <p>The U.S.-led coalition formally ended its combat mission supporting Iraqi forces in the ongoing fight against the Islamic State group last month. Some 2,500 troops will remain as the coalition shifts to an advisory mission to continue supporting Iraqi forces.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

## Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Runaway train car travels 16 miles</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.q13fox.com/news/runaway-train-car-travels-16-miles-before-being-stopped-in-washington">https://www.q13fox.com/news/runaway-train-car-travels-16-miles-before-being-stopped-in-washington</a>
GIST	<p><b>WALLA WALLA, Wash.</b> - A runaway train car was eventually stopped after traveling nearly 16 miles under its own steam in <a href="#">Washington state</a>.</p> <p>Footage from Walla Walla County Undersheriff Joe Klundt shows the tank car barreling down the tracks without a locomotive.</p> <p>The tank broke loose around 12:50 p.m. Tuesday near Rose Street in Walla Walla before rolling west, the <a href="#">Union-Bulletin</a> reported. About 40 minutes later, it hit a hill near Touchet where an emergency responder was able to climb on and pull the handbrake.</p> <p>The train car reached speeds of 50 mph but slowed to about 3 mph when it reached the hill.</p> <p>There were no injuries reported.</p> <p>The Columbia-Walla Walla Railroad's owner told the newspaper that a team was investigating.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Winter storms bring snow to parts Mideast</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/27/snow-israel-jordan-lebanon/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/27/snow-israel-jordan-lebanon/</a>

GIST	<p>People living in parts of Israel, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan woke up to a rare sight Thursday morning as winter storms brought heavy snowfall, rain and freezing temperatures from the Middle East to the southern Balkans.</p> <p>Historic sites, from the Roman ruins of Baalbek in Lebanon to Jerusalem's Old City, were covered in white — a rare occurrence even if last year brought similar snowfall.</p> <p>Parts of the Middle East began to record low temperatures last week, culminating in this week's snow. On Tuesday of last week, the Israel Meteorological Service reported frost and temperatures at or below 32 degrees across much of the country.</p> <p>In parts of Greece and Turkey, heavy snowfall disrupted air traffic, roads and power grids this week, leading to school closures as reports emerged of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan struggling to stay healthy and warm.</p> <p>But the snow also brought some scenes of wintry joy in parts of the world more accustomed to balmy weather and sunning on beaches.</p> <p>The Israel Meteorological Service forecast that snow would continue to fall through Thursday evening in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, with "unseasonably cold" temperatures and "occasional rainfall from the north to the northern Negev" desert, in the country's south.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/28 West accused of 'climate hypocrisy'</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/28/west-accused-of-climate-hypocrisy-as-emissions-dwarf-those-of-poor-countries">https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/28/west-accused-of-climate-hypocrisy-as-emissions-dwarf-those-of-poor-countries</a>
GIST	<p>In the first two days of January, the average Briton was already responsible for more carbon dioxide emissions than someone from the Democratic Republic of the Congo would produce in an entire year, according to analysis by the Center for Global Development (CGD).</p> <p>The study, which highlights the <a href="#">"vast energy inequality" between rich and poor</a> countries, found that each Briton produces 200 times the climate emissions of the average Congolese person, with people in the US producing 585 times as much. By the end of January, the carbon emitted by someone living in the UK will surpass the annual emissions of citizens of 30 low- and middle-income countries, it found.</p> <p>Euan Ritchie, a policy analyst at CGD Europe, said his work was prompted by the "climate hypocrisy" of western countries, including the UK and the US, that have pledged to stop aid funding to fossil fuel projects in developing states.</p> <p>"At Cop26 there was lots of hand-wringing by rich countries about the extent to which aid and other development finance should finance fossil fuels in poorer countries," said Ritchie. "The hypocrisy of this caught my attention."</p> <p>"Our analysis shows that in just a few days, the average person in the UK produces more climate emissions than people in many low-income countries do in an entire year. It would be a cruel irony if the countries that have least contributed to this problem won't be able to have access to energy infrastructure."</p> <p>Several countries, including some developing countries, and finance institutions have signed up to a pledge to end public <a href="#">support for international fossil fuel projects</a>. The same countries will be able to <a href="#">continue to develop fossil fuels at home</a>. The US has at least 24 pending fossil fuel projects representing more than 1.6 gigatons of potential greenhouse gas emissions, while the UK is licensing new oil and gas fields in the North Sea.</p> <p>The CGD research used World Bank data of per capita carbon emissions for each country, spread out over a year, to calculate the point at which a British or US citizen's energy use surpassed that of someone living</p>

in a low- or middle-income country. About 940 million people, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, [do not have access to electricity](#).

African leaders, including President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, who has committed Nigeria to net zero by 2060, and Lazarus Chakwera, the president of Malawi, have spoken out about their [countries' need to transition to net zero](#) via natural gas.

The Energy for Growth Hub, an international research network, estimates that if 48 countries in Africa, excluding South Africa and several north African nations, tripled their electricity consumption through use of natural gas, the resulting carbon emissions would be [less than 1% of the global total](#).

Vijaya Ramachandran, the director for energy and development at the Breakthrough Institute in Berkeley, California, argues that blanket bans on fossil fuel projects in poor countries are “colonial” and will entrench poverty while doing little to reduce the world’s carbon emissions.

“It’s very easy for rich countries to impose fossil fuel financing bans on poor countries, while at the same time increasing their own consumption of fossil fuels,” she said. “It’s rank hypocrisy and it’s devastating for poor countries as they need a wide range of energy to fuel development.

“It’s well known renewable energy is intermittent and needs to be backed up by other sources. Telling African countries they just need solar is completely hypocritical and colonial.”

Rose M Mutiso, the research director of [Energy](#) for Growth Hub, said the CGD research should be used to inform the debate over responsibility for the climate crisis.

“Solving the climate crisis in the medium term is the responsibility of high emitting countries, not only because they caused the problem but logically, it’s where high emissions are concentrated,” said Mutiso, who is Kenyan.

“The video gaming industry in California is using more energy than entire African countries,” she said. “There’s this idea that in California we can’t live without video games, or air conditioning, but we are worried about Africans moving up and consuming. It’s really important for us as Africans to establish that our development is non-negotiable. All of those decades of exploitation and being left behind – that is owed to us.”

Mutiso cited a 2019 study that estimated [electricity demand from gaming in California alone](#) would grow from 5 terawatt hours (TWh) in 2011 to as much as 11TWh by 2021, the same as Sri Lanka’s entire consumption.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Study: gas stoves worse for climate</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/study-gas-stoves-worse-for-climate-than-previously-thought/">https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/study-gas-stoves-worse-for-climate-than-previously-thought/</a>
GIST	<p>Gas stoves are contributing more to global warming than previously thought because of constant tiny methane leaks while they’re off, a new study found.</p> <p>The same study that tested emissions around stoves in homes raised new concerns about indoor air quality and health because of levels of nitrogen oxides measured.</p> <p>Even when they are not running, U.S. gas stoves are putting 2.6 million tons (2.4 million metric tons) of methane — in carbon dioxide equivalent units — into the air each year, a team of California researchers found in a study published in Thursday’s journal Environmental Science &amp; Technology. That’s equivalent to the annual amount of greenhouse gases from 500,000 cars or what the United States puts into the air every three-and-a-half hours.</p>

“They’re constantly bleeding a little bit of methane into the atmosphere all the time,” said the study’s co-author Rob Jackson, a Stanford University climate scientist.

That methane is on top of the 6.8 million tons (6.2 million metric tons) of carbon dioxide that gas stoves emit into the air when they are in use and the gas is burned, the study said. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is dozens of times more potent than carbon dioxide but doesn’t stay in the atmosphere nearly as long and isn’t as plentiful in the air.

The researchers examined 53 home kitchens in California — many in bed and breakfasts they rented. They sealed most of the rooms in plastic tarps and then measured emissions when the stoves were working and when they were not. And what was surprising was that three-quarters of the methane released happened while the stoves were off, Jackson said. Those are emissions releases that the government doesn’t account for, he said.

“That’s a big deal because we’re trying to really reduce our carbon footprint and we claim that gas is cleaner than coal, which it is,” said study lead author Eric Lebel, a scientist at PSE Healthy Energy, an Oakland nonprofit. But he said much of the benefit disappears when leaks are taken into account.

Many communities have bans on gas stove use in future new construction that will take effect in future years, including New York City and the Bay Area cities of San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Berkeley, Jackson said.

“People can already choose electric appliances if they want,” said Frank Maisano, a Washington policy and public relations expert who represents gas and appliance interests. “People just like gas appliances because they perform better, especially in colder climates.”

“Natural gas appliances are generally more energy- and cost-effective than their electric counterparts,” Maisano said.

Jackson estimated that when all natural gas use and extraction is taken into account, about 100 million tons (91 million metric tons) of gas leaks into the atmosphere. And the couple million tons from gas stoves “is meaningful. That’s a substantial part and it’s a part that we haven’t included accurately in the past.”

The leakage finding is “a very important takeaway” and fits with other work that found there are often big leaks that account for much of the emissions, said Zachary Merrin, a research engineer with the Illinois Applied Research Institute’s Indoor Climate Research & Training group.

Merrin, who wasn’t part of the study, said the emission of un-combusted methane is “clearly bad. From an emissions standpoint, cooking directly with gas is better than using a fossil fuel powered electric stove but worse than using a solar powered electric stove.”

The methane leak isn’t dangerous to human health or as a possible explosive, Jackson said. But when conducting the tests, researchers found high levels of nitrogen oxides, greater than 100 parts per billion. Jackson said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency doesn’t have indoor air quality standards for that gas, but the measurements they took exceed its outdoor air quality standards. While methane doesn’t include nitrogen, the nitrogen oxides are byproducts of the combustion in natural gas ovens, he said.

Maisano said people should always use hood ranges and make sure they have proper ventilation. Jackson, who has a gas stove that he plans to replace, said he never used ventilation before this study, but that he now does so every time.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Hottest city nearly unlivable in summer?
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/27/phoenix-arizona-hottest-city-cooling-technologies">https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/27/phoenix-arizona-hottest-city-cooling-technologies</a>

## GIST

A surge in heat-related deaths amid record-breaking summer temperatures offer a “glimpse into the future” and a stark warning that one of America’s largest cities is already unlivable for some, according to its new heat tsar.

Almost 200 people died from extreme heat in [Phoenix](#) in 2020 – the hottest, driest and deadliest summer on record with 53 days topping 110F (43C) compared with a previous high of 33 days. Last year there were fewer scorching days, but the death toll remained staggeringly high, with people experiencing homelessness and addictions dying disproportionately.

Phoenix, the capital of Arizona, is accustomed to a hot desert climate, but day and night temperatures have been rising due to global heating and the city’s unchecked development, which has created a sprawling urban heat island.

Scorching temperatures have made summers increasingly perilous for the city’s 1.4 million people, with mortality and morbidity rates creeping up over the past two decades, but 2020 was a gamechanger when heat related deaths jumped by about 60%.

Last year, after another deadly summer, the mayor announced the region’s first dedicated unit to tackle the growing hazard of urban heat, which also threatens the city’s economic viability.

“Phoenix is already unlivable in summer for far too many of our residents, who literally didn’t live because it was too hot. Every death is preventable and shows that there’s much much more for us to do to make the city livable and comfortable for everyone,” said David Hondula, the recently appointed director of Phoenix’s heat response and mitigation office.

“2020 was a glimpse into the future – it’s the type of summer that could be normal by 2050 or 2080, so that’s what we need to be prepared for so that Phoenix is livable and thriving.”

Phoenix is the country’s hottest and fifth most populous city, where businesses and people began flocking when affordable air conditioning became available in the 1950s. The population growth has led to a huge expansion in concrete infrastructure (buildings, roads and carparks) and a reduction in green areas, which has created heat islands – dangerously hot urban areas that absorb and re-emit the sun’s heat more than natural landscapes.

[Between 95% and 99% of homes in Phoenix have air conditioning.](#) yet in some surveys, as [many as a third of residents](#) in the larger metro area, more than a million people, have reported experiencing adverse effects from the heat – suggesting many cannot afford to power or repair their cooling units.

Hondula will lead a four-person team with two broad goals: protecting residents when it’s very hot (the heat response part), and coming up with long-term strategies to cool the city and make it more comfortable (the mitigation part). Both require better data, better coordination across government, and money.

For instance, the local health department has a highly-rated surveillance system but even then, the final tally and details of summer heat related fatalities are published the following February or March. “That leaves a very short window to plan for the next hot season, and deaths represent only the tip of a big iceberg ... We have almost no knowledge about what conditions people experience in their homes,” said Hondula, a climate and health scientist who has spent more than a decade investigating the risks and vulnerabilities associated with heat.

The team’s success will be measured in deaths and illness numbers, but the problems and solutions are interconnected: saving lives will require redesigning the city’s heat-trapping concrete landscape, as well as improving access to cooling centers, hydration stations and paramedics.

There are quick fire changes, or low-hanging fruit as Hondula puts it, which he thinks could have some immediate impact. For example, too many people have trouble accessing cooling centers when they need

them; more signs and longer opening hours would help, as would public health campaigns asking residents who call 911 to stay with the person until first responders arrive.

But it will take much broader changes to tackle the root causes driving deaths in the most vulnerable group: middle-aged men experiencing homelessness and substance misuse problems. “To reduce deaths, we need to be thinking way upstream and take steps to ease the housing affordability crisis and improve access to substance abuse and recovery services.”

Hondula recently submitted the 2022 heat response plan to city hall, in an attempt to coordinate the existing patchwork of services. “I’m impressed by the number of programs but the death and illness numbers are moving in the wrong direction, so there’s a disconnect we need to address,” he said. “If we mean to take a hazard seriously, relying on good fortune, luck and happenstance is not the best model.” Mitigation will be focused on trees and infrastructure, which will be led by an urban forester and a built environment expert who are yet to be hired.

[Planting trees](#) is broadly popular and has been touted as a relatively painless fix to combating climate change by world leaders including Donald Trump, Britain’s Boris Johnson and Turkish president Recep Erdoğan.

In Phoenix, the city published a tree master plan in 2010, pledging to increase canopy cover to 25% by 2030 (from an estimated 11% to 13% at the time). The city is not on track to meet that goal, and the target may eventually be revised to reflect the city’s broader sustainability and equity goals such as targeting under-shaded neighborhoods and public transit routes where people walk and wait.

“Trees are an important part of the plan which residents have been asking for years, but they aren’t a cure-all for the city,” Hondula said. “But if we could have 30% of a 20-min walking path shaded, it would provide health protection for most summer days,” said Hondula.

Money is an issue. So far, the unit doesn’t have a budget for programs but there are options.

The heat unit has bid for a slice of the city’s second American rescue plan installment, due in May, to fund a residential tree planting program targeting 25 neighborhoods with the least shade.

Engineered shade such as cool pavement – a reflective compound painted over asphalt that reduces the amount of sun absorbed – is being piloted across the city. The [results are encouraging](#), but again Hondula warns against clinging to this as an easy fix.

“I don’t think we can go all-in on cool pavement because that commits us to hard infrastructure in places where there might be better uses,” he said. “Our office needs additional land for tree planting that might be land that is currently streets ... but any talk about lane reduction or lane removal is a sensitive conversation.”

Another sensitive and critical area is the city’s property development gravy train, which for years has been forging ahead faster than its ad hoc mitigation efforts. Hondula acknowledges that getting to grips with the gaps and loopholes in every part of the building process – from zoning and permitting to shade requirements and enforcement – will take time.

“There’s a very fast train moving ahead with respect to development and it may be too late for the heat mitigation office to intervene in existing plans. It could be three years down the road before our fingerprint shows up, but we have to accept that these are longer term processes and get working as quickly as we can.”

Climate disasters such as deadly heatwaves, wildfires, drought and torrential rain storms are increasingly [frequent, costly and deadly](#) and experts agree that slashing greenhouse gas emissions is the only way to limit global heating.



	<p>But towns and cities are not helpless. In fact, Hondula argues, tackling urban heating could help turn around the city's livability decline. "All cities have tiny hands on the big lever [of global heating] but the dominant driver of regional climate change has been urbanization, and that's a lever we do have in our hands as local governments.</p> <p>"Some modeling suggests with widespread deployment of cooling technologies like trees and reflective surfaces, we could end up with a city in the future that is cooler than we have today even with continued global scale warming, which is a very encouraging sign."</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

## Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Spanaway: deadly shooting mall parking lot</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://komonews.com/news/local/suspect-hospitalized-in-officer-involved-shooting-in-spanaway-authorities-say">https://komonews.com/news/local/suspect-hospitalized-in-officer-involved-shooting-in-spanaway-authorities-say</a>
GIST	<p>SPANAWAY, Wash. — SPANAWAY, Wash. – A Pierce County Sheriff's deputy shot and killed a man at a shopping mall parking lot on Thursday night.</p> <p>It happened around 6 p.m. on Pacific Avenue at the intersection of Military Road S.</p> <p>The deputy showed up after someone called 911 to report a suspicious person parked outside an O'Reilly Auto Store. Within five minutes of the deputy's arrival, shots rang out.</p> <p>Two men who work nearby said they heard at least four gunshots and then a woman came inside their store to grab her kids and leave wanting to get them to safety.</p> <p>At the shooting scene, a van could be seen crashed into a patrol car as if it had rammed the vehicle. The passenger side window appeared to be shot out.</p> <p>The man who was shot was rushed to a hospital but later died. It's unclear if he had any weapon other than possibly the van that was crashed into the patrol car.</p> <p>One deputy was slightly hurt but it was not related to the gunfire.</p> <p>The case is now being handled by the Pierce County Force Investigation Team which will be handling all updates to the public.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Man groped flight attendant; jailed 6mo.</b>
SOURCE	<a href="http://www.cnn.com/travel/article/prison-time-flight-attendant-assault/index.html">http://www.cnn.com/travel/article/prison-time-flight-attendant-assault/index.html</a>
GIST	<p>(CNN) — A man charged with groping a flight attendant has been sentenced to six months in prison.</p> <p>Enio Socorro Zayas was sentenced on Monday in US District Court in the Southern District of Florida, according to court documents.</p> <p>Zayas was indicted after an incident on August 6, 2021, aboard American Airlines flight 1723, traveling from Cancun to Miami International Airport.</p> <p>According to an affidavit in support of the criminal complaint, the flight attendant, believing Zayas was asleep, placed a snack package on his lap.</p> <p>When she turned away, the flight attendant "felt a hand grip the bottom of her thigh and move upwards towards the lower portion of her buttocks before rubbing firmly from side to side," the affidavit reads.</p>

One of the passengers on board corroborated details of the incident to law enforcement, according to the affidavit.

Zayas pleaded guilty to assault in October.

Disruptive -- sometimes criminal -- passenger behavior has been a serious problem during the pandemic. Last year was the [worst on record](#) for poor passenger behavior aboard US airliners.

Nearly 6,000 reports of unruly behavior were reported in 2021, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

In January 2021, the FAA announced a ["zero-tolerance" policy](#) for unruly passenger behavior that skips warnings or counseling and goes directly to penalties, which can include heavy fines and jail time.

From 1995 to 2020, an average of 182 investigations were initiated per year. In 2021, the FAA initiated 1,081 investigations -- a 494% increase over the historic average of investigations.

As of November 4, the FAA had referred 37 out of 227 cases for which it had initiated enforcement action to the FBI for criminal prosecution review. (The FAA does not have authority to prosecute criminal cases).

Those cases are part of [growing attention from the Justice Department](#) on unruly passenger behavior.

Additional cases are being referred to the FBI regularly, the FAA told CNN earlier this month.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Mexico resort town 2 <sup>nd</sup> deadly shooting
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/27/playa-del-carmen-manager-shot/">https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/01/27/playa-del-carmen-manager-shot/</a>
GIST	<p>Authorities in the Mexican state of Quintana Roo are investigating the shooting death of a man who worked as the manager at a popular beachfront bar, the second fatal attack within a week in the resort town of Playa del Carmen.</p> <p>The Tuesday killing at Mamita's Beach Club followed an assault the previous Friday on three Canadians at a resort less than six miles away. Officials have said last week's shooting at the Hotel Xcaret was the result of an argument between guests, and that the Canadians who died both had criminal records.</p> <p>In the most recent slaying, multiple media reports identified the victim as Mamita's manager Federico Mazzoni, a native of Argentina. He was reportedly discovered in a bathroom, according to local news accounts.</p> <p>The attorney general's office in the state of Quintana Roo wrote in a tweet Tuesday evening that it was investigating the homicide of a restaurant employee in the municipality of Solidaridad and had sent agents to collect evidence and do interviews at the scene. The tweet did not identify the business or the victim.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Quintana Roo's secretary of security wrote in a tweet that helicopter patrols were continuing to search for suspects in the killing.</p> <p>Mamita's, which rents out pool and beach chairs and boasts live DJ sets, is situated on the Caribbean Sea in an area surrounded by restaurants, resorts and bars. On social media, the club shows pictures of smiling patrons in swimsuits, peaceful beaches and tropical drinks — a far cry from the news images of police on the shore after the shooting.</p> <p>Tourist destinations in the Riviera Maya region, including Playa del Carmen and Cancún, have been trying to combat news of violence for months, after several shootings in popular areas since the fall. In November, tourists south of Cancún ran into resorts for safety after gunmen shot at each other on the beach. Two men died in the incident, a clash between gang members over drug territory, authorities said.</p>

	<p>Experts told The Washington Post late last year that the violence is spilling out of disputes over drug trafficking.</p> <p>“Where tourism increases, so does the drug trade,” Kenneth Bombace, chief executive of Global Threat Solutions, which offers travel protection services, told The Post. “Where you have a growing population, you’re going to have these problems down there ... and people are getting caught in the crossfire.”</p> <p>The U.S. State Department says travelers should reconsider going to Mexico because of the coronavirus, and it advises those visiting Quintana Roo to “exercise increased caution” because of crime. The U.S. Consulate General in Merida reiterated that advice Tuesday in a security alert issued “in light of recent security incidents and criminal activity in popular tourist destinations” including Cancún and Playa del Carmen.</p> <p>“Criminal activity and violence may occur throughout the state, including areas frequented by U.S. citizen visitors,” the alert said.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Report: Echo Glen facility short staffed</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://mynorthwest.com/3327623/echo-glen-youth-detention-center-site-of-recent-escape-understaffed-underfunded-study-says/">https://mynorthwest.com/3327623/echo-glen-youth-detention-center-site-of-recent-escape-understaffed-underfunded-study-says/</a>
GIST	<p>After five teenagers convicted of various felonies, one of whom was found guilty of first degree murder in 2021, broke out of and escaped from Echo Glen Children’s Center, a juvenile detention facility in Snoqualmie, questions remain as to how the escape happened and if it could have been prevented.</p> <p>Investigators say the teens strong-armed several employees at the facility and stole a gray 2018 Ford Fusion at around 7:45 a.m. on Wednesday. The 15 year-old murder convict was apprehended by Kent Police Department on Thursday. Two other escaped teenagers are still at large following subsequent Thursday arrests in Kent and Kirkland.</p> <p>A <a href="#">2018 report</a> indicates that employees of Echo Glen insist that the detention facility is short staffed.</p> <p>Conducted by the Hyzer Group for the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) and the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration, the report provides staffing analysis of juvenile rehabilitation centers across the state, including eight community facilities for incarcerated youths and three higher security residential facilities, including Snoqualmie’s Echo Glen.</p> <p>Cumulatively, it suggests that the state’s juvenile rehabilitation facilities are chronically understaffed, and calls on the state’s Legislature to appropriate additional funds to address the problem.</p> <p>“There is clear agreement among all staff in all positions in the institutions and community facilities that the current staff levels are not adequate,” referencing an internal survey of staff which found that nearly 85% of Echo Glen’s 33 employees agreed that the facility was not adequately staffed “to a level that enables us to be successful.”</p> <p>Among the report’s key findings is that rehabilitation counselors, due to lack of staff, are forced to portion most of their time towards supervision and security tasks, unable to provide “core residential treatment” therapy.</p> <p>“Due to insufficient staffing levels, Juvenile Rehabilitation Residential Counselors (JRRCs) Juvenile Rehabilitation Counselor Assistances (JRCAs) are not able to implement all key components of the Rehabilitation Model,” finding that “more than three quarter of their time was spent providing floor supervision, safety and security, transports, and custodial care.”</p>

	<p>The report goes on to claim that “facilities are often unable to provide training before staff begin working directly with youth,” with the caveat that as many as 140 hours of training are required for juvenile rehabilitation counselors.</p> <p>“Staff report the Dealing with Resistive Youth (DWRY) safety training or Community Safety Training is often not provided before staff begin working with youth,” the report notes. “Some staff do not receive safety training for weeks, sometimes months. On-call staff are sometimes not trained until months after they start, limiting their ability to stop and address egregious behaviors.”</p> <p>“JRAs need to be fully funded and staffed – and the state legislature should make that happen before more people get hurt,” wrote a spokesperson with the union which represents juvenile rehabilitation employees, AFSCME Council 28 of the Washington Federation of State Employees.</p> <p>When asked for comment Thursday on how failure to adequately fund Echo Glen might have directly or indirectly contributed to the escape of the five teenagers, Gov. Jay Inslee said that he had “done some preliminary inquiries,” but that “it is way too early to make assertions that this had anything to do with staffing level, or had anything to do with training.”</p> <p>“I think when something like this happens, people jump on it to try to advance their agenda. So no, I don’t think it’s appropriate to reach a conclusion that they’ve suggested ... There is a critical incident report system that the department will use to figure out what happened here and figure out what we could do to prevent it, if anything. And we’ll get to the bottom of that, and that’ll be public.”</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Jordan’s army kills 27 in border drug bust</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/middleeast/jordan-drug-smugglers-syria.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/27/world/middleeast/jordan-drug-smugglers-syria.html</a>
GIST	<p>Jordanian troops killed 27 people they described as armed drug smugglers who were trying to cross the border from Syria under cover of a snowstorm Thursday, a spokesman for the Jordanian Army said.</p> <p>The people were killed after they opened fire on Jordanian soldiers as they tried to cross the border in three groups on foot, the army said. They were using the weather to disguise their movement, a common tactic, the army said.</p> <p>“Regarding the casualties, this is biggest we have seen,” Col. Mustafa Al Hiyari, of the Jordanian Army, said in a phone interview with The New York Times.</p> <p>Several others suspected of being part of the smugglers’ operation, some whom were injured, retreated back to Syrian territory, Colonel Hiyari said. He said that no Jordanian soldiers were injured.</p> <p>While the identity of the suspects was not clear, in the past, smugglers have come from large families and tribes whose members live on both sides of the border. Increased poverty in the area has made it easy for criminal networks to recruit couriers, Jordanian officials have said. Sometimes, the smugglers appear to receive help from Syrian troops posted along the border.</p> <p><a href="#">A New York Times investigation</a> published in December found that in the economic vacuum created by the Syrian civil war, powerful Syrians, including high ranking security officials and relatives of President Bashar al-Assad, were playing lead roles in an illegal drug industry to manufacture and export illegal amphetamines. The drugs, the report said, are smuggled from Syria mostly through Jordan and Lebanon, and then further afield.</p> <p>“From 2021, we have witnessed a massive increase of smuggling operations across the border with Syria,” Mr. Hiyari said. Last week, he said, a Jordanian <a href="#">Army officer was killed and three others were injured</a> during a similar incident. After that, the army loosened its rules of engagement along the border, giving the army more leeway to shoot at people they suspect to be smugglers.</p>

“Because the judge recently changed rules of engagement, this has allowed us to shoot the smugglers if they are using weapons,” Colonel Hiyari said.

The army displayed photos showing what it said were bags of seized narcotics on its Twitter account and vowed [in a statement](#) that it would squash further attempts with an “iron fist.”

Rayan Marouf, a Syrian activist who documents casualties at the Jordan border, said that at least 15 people have been reported missing from the Ramthan clan, a community that lives along the border in the southern Syrian province of Sweida, where drug smuggling is common.

Residents in the border villages reported hearing clashes overnight, and stray bullets left holes in houses, he said.

Mr. Marouf said the army’s new rules of engagement appear to have made Thursday’s clash more deadly. He called it a massacre, adding, “Usually at the borders, we document the killing of one or two smugglers.”

The Jordanian Army reported [that over the past year](#) it had seized about 15.5 million pills of narcotics — including captagon, an illegal amphetamine, and tramadol, a legal painkiller. The army also reported recovering more than 16,000 sheets of hashish weighing 1,675 pounds, and almost 4.5 pounds of heroin.

[The Times investigation](#) found that much of the production and distribution of captagon is overseen by the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army, an elite unit commanded by President Basar al-Assad’s younger brother, and includes businessmen with close ties to the government, Hezbollah and other members of the president’s extended family.

It is part of an increasingly established drug trade that emerged from Syria’s decade-long civil war. The war has shattered the country’s economy, reducing many of its people to poverty and prompting members of Syria’s business, political and military elite to look for new ways to earn hard currency and circumvent Western economic sanctions.

The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, dismissed the accusations as “fake news” in [a televised speech](#) last year and said that the group does not have anything to do with smuggling operations.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/28 Seoul charges fiery NKorea defector
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/world/asia/korea-border-leaflets-speech-law.html">https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/28/world/asia/korea-border-leaflets-speech-law.html</a>
GIST	<p>SEOUL — A North Korean defector has been indicted on charges of breaking a South Korean law banning the spread of propaganda leaflets along the inter-Korean border, prosecutors and lawyers said Friday.</p> <p>Park Sang-hak is the first person to be indicted under the new law, which critics say puts a policy of engagement with North Korea above human rights and is unconstitutional.</p> <p><a href="#">For years</a>, Mr. Park and others like him have launched balloons into North Korea loaded with propaganda leaflets urging North Koreans to rise up against their authoritarian leader, Kim Jong-un. Under the law, which went into effect last March, sending such leaflets was made a crime punishable by a fine or a prison term of up to three years.</p> <p>Mr. Park defied the ban in April by launching 10 balloons carrying a half million leaflets. The police later raided his office and interrogated him. In July, they formally asked prosecutors to indict Mr. Park under the law, which President Moon Jae-in has vowed to strictly enforce.</p> <p>Lee Hun, Mr. Park’s lawyer, said on Friday that he received a formal notice from prosecutors that Mr. Park had been indicted on Wednesday on charges of “attempting” to send the leaflets because investigators lacked evidence that the leaflets actually landed in the North.</p>

[A remnant from the Cold War](#), the leaflets have created [tensions](#) not only between the two Koreas but also between North Korean human rights activists and Mr. Moon's government.

North Korea has called the leaflets an "intolerable provocation." Mr. Moon's government sponsored the new law after accusing activists of provoking the North unnecessarily.

The president's conservative critics accused him of suppressing freedom of speech and aiding Mr. Kim's totalitarian regime "at North Korea's behest."

"If an evil law is a law, send me to prison!" Mr. Park said on Friday. "Even if they send me to prison, my colleagues will continue to send leaflets."

Mr. Lee, the lawyer, said he planned to take the case to the Constitutional Court and ask it to overturn the law.

After Mr. Park launched the leaflets in April, Mr. Kim's sister and spokeswoman, Kim Yo-jong, called him "dirty human scum" and [warned of "consequences."](#)

About 33,800 North Koreans have fled to South Korea since the 1990s. Mr. Park, who fled in 1999, has stood out for his highly public campaign supporting North Korean human rights, although critics consider him theatrical.

His group, [Fighters For Free North Korea](#), calls the ruling Kim family in Pyongyang womanizers and "dictatorial pigs," and burns them in effigy during outdoor rallies in South Korea. Its leaflets also call Mr. Kim a "human butcher" who killed his [uncle](#) and [half brother](#).

There has been no credible study on how many North Koreans read or react to the propaganda leaflets. Analysts say that leaflets are not as effective as radio broadcasts and flash drives smuggled across the Chinese border. But launching leaflets is perhaps the activists' most visible campaign tactic.

Mr. Park has often invited media to his balloon-launching ceremonies, where the large hydrogen balloons waft across the world's most heavily armed border. Once in North Korea, timer devices click, unfastening vinyl bundles. Leaflets, dollar bills, mini-Bibles and USB drives [chock-full of content banned in the North](#) fall out of the sky like snowflakes.

Mr. Kim keeps his people under a total information blackout in North Korea, blocking the internet and making sure all radio and TV sets receive his government's propaganda broadcasts only. The government in Seoul said the balloons endanger people living on both sides of the border.

In 2014, the North Korean military fired shells at balloons drifting across the border, but instead hit South Korean villages, prompting the South to [return fire](#).

In [a poll](#) taken last May, 51 percent of the respondents in South Korea supported the new ban, while 37 percent said it violated freedom of speech. Among those living close to the border, the support rate was 57 to 60 percent. Cities and provinces near the border have also called for Mr. Park's punishment.

When North Korea [blew up](#) in 2020 a liaison office on its side of the border where officials from both Koreas had worked together, it cited South Korea's failure to implement [an agreement](#) banning [leaflets and other propaganda warfare](#) as the impetus. Mr. Moon's government accelerated its efforts to push the anti-leaflet bill through Parliament after the liaison office was destroyed.

South Korea's conservative opposition has noted a jarring contrast between Mr. Moon's crackdown on leaflets and his restrained response when North Korea [killed a South Korean fisheries official](#) or when the country likened Mr. Moon to a "[parrot](#)" and "[mongrel dog](#)" that followed orders from the United States.



“President Moon seems to believe that the only way to keep peace on the Korean Peninsula is to do nothing that will disturb the Kim brother and sister in the North,” said Tae Yong-ho, a former North Korean diplomat who is now an opposition lawmaker in Seoul.

Mr. Park, who is set to go to trial in the coming weeks for violating the leaflet ban, has some harsh critics of his own, many of whom are also North Korean human rights activists.

[Lee Min-bok](#), another defector from North Korea, criticized not only the law but also Mr. Park, who he said jeopardized the entire balloon campaign by provoking both governments.

Mr. Lee started sending leaflets in 2006, before Mr. Park, and favored low-key operations that didn’t attract media attention. He launched leaflets that focused on providing news from outside North Korea, rather than criticizing the Kim regime.

“The extremely provocative language in Park Sang-hak’s leaflets has nothing to do with promoting North Korean human rights, but is tailored to please conservatives and provoke progressives in the South,” Mr. Lee said. “He wants to become a hero by going to prison for fighting this law.”

Mr. Park’s legal troubles precede Friday’s indictment. He is also on trial for breaking a law on collecting donations. In August, he was given a suspended eight-month prison term for [beating](#) a South Korean TV reporter who showed up at his home for an interview request.

Mr. Park has denied the allegations against him and dismissed his critics as “snakes” and “hypocrites.” He often points to an incident in 2011, when a man was [arrested](#) in South Korea on a charge of plotting to assassinate him with a poison needle at North Korea’s request.

“Kim Jong-un wants to kill me, and President Moon wants to send me to prison,” Mr. Park told reporters in May. “But they cannot stop us from telling facts and truth.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	01/27 Tacoma businesses fed up with crime
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article257701433.html">https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article257701433.html</a>
GIST	<p>Hundreds of people from across Tacoma gathered at the LeMay - America’s Car Museum on Wednesday night to raise the alarm on problems affecting their businesses.</p> <p>From break-ins of employees’ cars to vandalism to homeless encampments, business owners demanded action from the city to address their concerns.</p> <p>The event was organized by Tacoma Safe, a community group that formed last year in response to repeated complaints from business owners about crime and lack of police response.</p> <p>The meeting was attended by high-ranking public figures, including Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards, new police chief Avery Moore, Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier and Pierce County Prosecutor Mary Robnett.</p> <p>Meanwhile, a few dozen people gathered outside the museum to protest a potential camping ban that has been supported by members of the Tacoma Safe group. Cathy Pick, chair of the Tacoma Tenants Organizing Committee, was one of the them and said the focus should be on housing people rather than increasing police and putting people in jail.</p> <p>“Those of you inside who have the resources and the skills to build buildings, let’s just forget this camping ban and let’s start breaking ground all over the city and get these people off the streets,” Pick said.</p> <p>Angela Connelly is a leader of Tacoma Safe and longtime Tacoma resident, married to well-known Tacoma attorney Jack Connelly. Connelly said Wednesday that the event is the beginning of a new path</p>

forward where the voices of business owners are going to be heard. She said business owners from across Tacoma were represented.

“We’re not going to go back to having no voice,” Connelly said. “And it’s not only the businesses, it’s the citizens ... We are a family in Tacoma. We’re a family, no one gets left behind. And we are all going to be at a crowded big table.”

City leaders said Wednesday that they’re working to address concerns by businesses. Mayor Victoria Woodards said the city is working to create incentives for hiring more police officers and that she is planning to bring forward a package of programs next week aimed at helping businesses.

“I am so encouraged by the number of people who turned out tonight and the number of people who really want to work on solutions,” Woodards said Wednesday.

#### **BUSINESSES FACE BREAK-INS, VANDALISM**

A video was played at the event showing various Tacoma business owners and employees talking about what they’re facing.

One of them was Jessica Johnston, director of Court House Square on A Street in downtown Tacoma. Court House Square is a historic building housing two restaurants, a coffee shop, a 2,000-square-foot ballroom, a large community space and dozens of local businesses.

Johnston said just that morning she had to put the building in lockdown due to a man with a gun downtown. The man was later apprehended by police.

“The one thing that I do ask from the city and the county is that we have some sort of recognition and resolve as to what we should do if we see a fire — should we call 911? If we are pushed out of the building, should we call the police, or is that our responsibility now?” she said.

Johnston, like many other business owners, said she hopes some solutions and healing come out of Wednesday’s meeting.

“How are we going to thrive and be the community that we can be — supporting commerce, supporting each other — without some sort of plan of attack?” she said.

Tacoma resident Eric Cederstrand is the president of Commencement Bay Development and a real estate broker for Neil Walter.

For more than 20 years, he said, he’s worked to help make Tacoma better, but in the past couple of years has noticed worsening problems at his multiple properties and developments across the city, where he’s trying to attract businesses.

“The garbage, the graffiti, the windows — I mean we’ve spent over \$60,000 in 2021 on broken windows ... As soon as I replaced the window, it’s cracked again,” Cederstrand said.

He added that employees are having their cars broken into and are being harassed by people who are mentally ill and do not have a place to go.

“Criminals aren’t going to jail. Not everybody needs to go to jail, but we have no enforcement — our streets are being taken over at night,” Cederstrand said. “I just feel like the wheels have come off the bus, and it’s very frustrating.”

Pete Bristow, owner of Bristow’s Auto Repair in South Tacoma, said businesses are fed up and starting to look to move elsewhere.

"I have wheels stolen off of customers' cars. I have catalytic converters stolen out from underneath customers' cars. I'm over this. I'm over \$35,000 in theft and damage. That's just me," Bristow said.

According to an end of year crime report from the Tacoma Police Department, the city saw an increase in both violent and property crimes in 2021 compared to 2020.

In 2020, there were 4,467 reported violent crimes, including more than 4,021 assault offenses and 30 homicides. In 2021, there were 5,242 reported violent crimes, including 4,813 assault offenses and 31 homicides.

As for property crimes, there were 21,569 reported for 2020, including 134 arsons, 2,059 burglaries and 8,638 thefts. In 2021, there were 25,534 reported violent crimes, including 241 arsons, 2,270 burglaries and 9,487 thefts.

#### DEMANDING ACTION

Connelly said that the Tacoma Safe group would continue to meet and look at how to increase police response across the city, which was a recurring demand from people at Wednesday's meeting.

"How do we give police incentives to get more police hired here? How do we look at how other communities are doing this to get more police? How can we get more community liaison officers?" Connelly said.

Tacoma Safe members say they also want to ensure that 911 calls are answered, police are dispatched when called and that it's mandatory police take reports on every crime reported by businesses. They also want to see a police liaison officer to work directly with businesses.

"We do want specific solutions," Connelly said. "We want quicker response times. We want more police. We want more support for the police on every level while we are having transformation, which is very good. We want both ends, and we're not going to settle for either/or anymore."

Tacoma embarked on a transformation of its police department in 2020 after police accountability protests that summer. So far, the city has which implemented body cameras for its police officers and is looking at possibly implementing an alternative response team to respond to people having a mental health crisis, homelessness-related issues, and certain types of calls for service traditionally handled by police officers.

Henry Betts, a detective with the Tacoma Police Department and president of Tacoma Police Union Local 6, said police are frustrated, too.

"When you call 911 and wait four or five hours for a response, is that acceptable? It's not. We have failed you," Betts said. "I can give you a list of excuses. I can talk about the pandemic. I can talk about police accountability. I can talk about the reduction in staffing. Do any of them change it when you wait four hours for a police officer to get there?"

Betts said the city needs more officers. In October, the Tacoma Police Department had more than 40 unfilled positions out of 264 commissioned police personnel in the budget.

"On behalf of the officers and detectives, we didn't sign up to be there four hours late or the next day or to not catch the guy," Betts said. "It's not what we signed up for. We like to catch the guy. We like to high five and talk about the chase and the capture and the arrest. We want to do that, but we need help and resources."

Tacoma Safe members also stressed addressing homeless encampments in the city that businesses say have been negatively impacting them. The group said they support safe camping, parking and housing for the homeless and have previously supported a camping ban to remove encampments on the streets.

“There’s homeless encampments, right where I want to do business,” said Michael Okoro, owner of Limitless Apparel on Hilltop. “If I look outside of my window, I can see people, abandoned cars, people sleeping, etc, etc. There’s more businesses in my area that have the same thing where they can’t feel safe during the day or at night.”

Okoro said he’s ready to defend himself and his business if it comes to that. “If some of these problems aren’t addressed, I think that it’ll cause regular people, regular citizens, regular business owners to kind of take matters into their own hands. Think of Batman. Think of vigilante justice,” he said.

#### PROTEST AGAINST CAMPING BAN

The idea of a camping ban in Tacoma is what drew people to protest outside the car museum, including Pick, chair of the Tacoma Tenants Organizing Committee.

“We’re just here to make the point that what they’re advocating for is not what the city wants and not what the city needs. What the city needs ... is shelter space,” Pick said.

Pick said a camping ban would be unconstitutional, pointing to the Ninth Circuit Appellate Court ruling in *Martin v. Boise* that says a city can only ban camping if there is enough shelter space for all unhoused individuals.

Beverly Allen, a longtime practicing attorney in Tacoma who was also at Wednesday’s protest, echoed that a camping ban right now in Tacoma would be “flatly unconstitutional.”

“I think you can look around Yakima Avenue, different parts of our city, and conclude that there’s simply not enough shelter space or that the shelter space that is available, has too many requirements or too many restrictions,” Allen said.

“It’s not a long term solution for those folks, which is why they end up back on the streets. And so I think it would be very difficult to prove. I think it’s theoretically possible to defend it, but I don’t think (the city) has the housing right now to do that.”

David Galazin, chair of the housing committee for the Tacoma-Pierce County Democratic Socialists of America, also came out to protest. He said the meeting hosted by Tacoma Safe “seems like the most powerful people in the city and the richest family in the city getting together to talk about what to do about the poorest family in the city.”

“I don’t want the business owners and the wealthy people of Tacoma to not have a voice,” Galazin said. “I certainly think that they should. But we’re here today because too often the only voice we hear is from people who are well connected.”

Pick told protesters to stay on public property outside of the museum, but some protesters also came inside the building with a sign calling to “listen to the workers” and not landlords. They were escorted out of the building by museum employees.

Later that night during the event, a woman at the protest outside the museum was struck and injured by a pickup that drove away from the scene. The woman was taken to a nearby hospital. Police are investigating the incident.

#### LEADERS RESPOND

Following Wednesday night’s event, Tacoma leaders responded to the complaints by businesses.

Avery Moore, Tacoma’s new police chief, told members of the audience that he would make a point to visit the businesses who spoke during the meeting and will dig into claims about police not showing up.

“I promise you we won’t fail you anymore,” Moore said.

	<p>Woodards said she was encouraged by the number of people who showed up to the event and said she has committed to bringing back a business advisory council that was started during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure voices of businesses are heard.</p> <p>Woodards added that at the next City Council study session she will bring forward a package of programs to respond to businesses concerns.</p> <p>“It takes time to hire officers, but we are in the midst of trying to get incentives,” Woodards said. “And so we are working on all the things that we can do to address this issue, but it’s just a good feeling for a community to recognize that we all play a role.”</p> <p>Council member Conor McCarthy said Wednesday he hopes the meeting will create the political will needed to take swift action on some of the topics raised, like violent crime and encampments. McCarthy has previously supported increasing police patrols and a public property camping ban, the latter of which was shot down by a majority of City Council members in December.</p> <p>“I think meetings like this help create a sense of urgency, which maybe it’s not lacking, but there hasn’t been a great enough sense of urgency to get the job done,” McCarthy said.</p>
	<a href="#">Return to Top</a>

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Escaped convicted teen murderer caught</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/several-juveniles-escape-snoqualmie-detention-center/3BDUDTHJBZBLPNCL6CDATFA2M/">https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/several-juveniles-escape-snoqualmie-detention-center/3BDUDTHJBZBLPNCL6CDATFA2M/</a>
GIST	<p>SNOQUALMIE, Wash. — Deputies from the King County Sheriff’s Office have arrested one of five teens who escaped from Echo Glen Children’s Center in Snoqualmie on Wednesday.</p> <p>The teens are between 14 to 17 years old. They have violent records, including one with a murder conviction, 15-year-old Timothy Hernandez-Ebanks, according to the King County Sheriff’s Office.</p> <p>Hernandez-Ebanks was arrested by deputies in South King County at around 1:30 a.m. Thursday.</p> <p>He was considered to be the most dangerous among the teens, investigators said.</p> <p>Four other teens are still missing.</p> <p>Hernandez-Ebanks was convicted for fatally shooting a man.</p> <p>According to court documents, Hernandez-Ebanks was walking down a Burien street on the night of April 2020 when he pulled out a loaded 9 mm handgun and randomly shot 35-year-old Hassan Ali Hassan.</p> <p>Hernandez-Ebanks shot Hassan in the back of the head because “he just felt like doing it,” court documents state.</p> <p>Police said he confessed to the crime, and he was eventually sent to Echo Glen Children’s Center.</p> <p>But on Wednesday morning, Hernandez-Ebanks escaped with four other teens.</p> <p>Investigators said the teens strong-armed several employees at the facility and stole a car at around 7:45 a.m.</p> <p>The teenagers fled in a blue 2018 Ford Fusion belonging to the facility. It has a Washington license plate 27545E.</p> <p>Echo Glen Children’s Center is a security facility that is not fenced but is bordered by natural wetlands.</p>

	<p>The facility provides treatment services for younger male offenders and is the only institution for female offenders.</p> <p>The facility provides dialectical behavior therapy, aggression replacement treatment, cultural programming, sex offense-specific treatment and inpatient chemical dependency treatment, with gender-specific programming for females.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/27 More Tacoma fires added to arson probe</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article257772113.html">https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article257772113.html</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Two vehicle fires and an on-fire shopping cart reported Wednesday evening and early Thursday morning are being investigated as arson, Tacoma police said. The fires add to a growing list of recent arson investigations in the city.</p> <p>Tacoma Police Department spokesperson Wendy Haddow said she has no reason to believe the overnight fires are connected to the 12 suspicious fires reported Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, noting that these most recent fires occurred in much different areas of the city.</p> <p>“Very significantly different than the ones from yesterday,” Haddow said. “Nothing to indicate these are in any way related.”</p> <p>Most of the 12 fires reported Tuesday night and Wednesday morning targeted structures with people inside, fire officials said Wednesday. No injuries were reported from the three most recent fires, and the two vehicles that burned were unoccupied.</p> <p>The first incident Wednesday evening was a shopping cart on fire at about 7:30 p.m. in the parking lot of a grocery store in the 700 block of South 56th Street in Tacoma’s South End.</p> <p>Less than two hours later, a vehicle fire was reported in the 500 block of South 78th Street. Haddow said the vehicle was fully engulfed by the flames.</p> <p>And just after 12:30 a.m. Thursday morning, a fire burned a vehicle parked in a carport outside an apartment complex in the 1000 block of South Mildred Street in western Tacoma. The carport wasn’t connected to the building.</p> <p>Tacoma Fire Department spokesperson Joe Meinecke said crews were able to move the car out from under the carport and extinguish the flames before the carport caught fire.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

<b>HEADLINE</b>	<b>01/27 Police: 5 shot in northwest D.C. hotel</b>
<b>SOURCE</b>	<a href="https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/dc-police-5-shot-at-days-inn-hotel-in-northwest/">https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/27/dc-police-5-shot-at-days-inn-hotel-in-northwest/</a>
<b>GIST</b>	<p>Metropolitan Police are investigating after five women were shot early Thursday at a Days Inn hotel in Northwest D.C.</p> <p>The police department tweeted around 4 a.m. that a shooting occurred in the 4400 block of Connecticut Avenue NW. Less than two hours later, the department added that five people had been shot and were receiving treatment at a hospital.</p> <p>One of the victims reportedly was transported to a hospital in “grave condition.”</p> <p>Police initially said there were four victims and that one had died, but the department retracted the statement and said no one had been pronounced dead.</p>



	<p>Police Cmdr. Duncan Bedlion said during a news conference that they were investigating the circumstances of the shooting, but they believe multiple people were at a party inside a hotel room, WUSA9 reported.</p> <p>Cmdr. Bedlion also said that community residents previously had complained about the hotel, including issues involving drug activity, the news outlet reported.</p> <p>The victims have not been identified, and police have not said whether they have identified any suspects.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	<b>01/27 Possible 6<sup>th</sup> victim to 1970s serial killer</b>
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/police-link-6th-victim-1970s-serial-killer-reward/story?id=82520045">https://abcnews.go.com/US/police-link-6th-victim-1970s-serial-killer-reward/story?id=82520045</a>
GIST	<p>Nearly 50 years after <a href="#">the suspected serial killer</a> dubbed "The Doodler" terrorized San Francisco's gay community, police believe they have identified another murder victim -- and have doubled their reward for information leading to a conviction in the cold case.</p> <p>Five homicides were previously linked to The Doodler in the mid-1970s, with the first known killing occurring on Jan. 27, 1974, police said. The five victims had suffered similar injuries, including stab wounds to the upper chest and back, officials said.</p> <p>On Wednesday, San Francisco police said they believe another man may be a sixth victim "as a result of a new investigation." Warren Andrews, who died several weeks after he was found unconscious in a park on April 27, 1975, was a victim of assault and battery, police said.</p> <p>All six victims are believed to be gay white men, police said.</p> <p>The suspect was nicknamed The Doodler after one victim who survived his attack said that when he met the suspect at a diner, he was drawing animal figures on a napkin.</p> <p>In 1975, that victim helped develop a forensic sketch of the suspect, who was previously described by officials as an African American man between the ages of 19 to 25.</p> <p>The San Francisco Police Department has since created a progression sketch of what the suspect may look like in recent years that it released in 2019.</p> <p>Police also announced a \$100,000 reward for information leading to a conviction in the case in 2019. They've now doubled the reward to \$200,000.</p> <p>A person of interest interviewed by police in 1976 remains a "focus of our investigation in 2022," the San Francisco Police Department said in a <a href="#">new crime bulletin</a> posted Thursday.</p> <p>The case was the focus of a recent <a href="#">San Francisco Chronicle podcast called "The Doodler"</a> that dug up new witnesses and clues in the mystery.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the Chronicle reporter behind the eight-part podcast, Kevin Fagan, <a href="#">reported</a> that police believe they're "closer than ever" to solving the case and have increased the reward in hopes of encouraging people to come forward.</p> <p>"We believe there are other persons who may have survived attacks by this same suspect or may have information regarding this suspect and these attacks," the San Francisco Police Department said in its new bulletin.</p> <p>Anyone with information is asked to call 415-575-4444 or text TIP411 and begin the message with "SFPD."</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

HEADLINE	01/27 Houston: 3 officers injured in shooting
SOURCE	<a href="https://abcnews.go.com/US/houston-police-officers-shot-suspect-run/story?id=82518161">https://abcnews.go.com/US/houston-police-officers-shot-suspect-run/story?id=82518161</a>
GIST	<p>Three Houston police officers were shot Thursday afternoon by a suspect who fled, carjacked a white Mercedes and barricaded himself in a home for several hours before being taken into custody, authorities said.</p> <p>Houston police said that the officers are all in stable condition with non-life-threatening injuries. They are being treated at Memorial Hermann Hospital.</p> <p>The incident started at about 2:40 p.m. local time when officers responded to a domestic call, Houston Police Chief Troy Finner told reporters at an evening news conference outside the hospital. The suspect spotted the officers and fled the scene in a car, with officers giving chase, Finner said.</p> <p>The suspect crashed into a parking lot gate and then opened fire at the officers with an automatic weapon, according to Finner. The officers returned fire but the suspect escaped, carjacked the Mercedes and continued his flight, the chief said.</p> <p>Police investigate the scene where three Houston police officers were shot near the inter...Read More One officer was hit in the arm, another was hit in the leg and the third officer was shot in the foot, the police said.</p> <p>The woman who was driving the Mercedes was unharmed.</p> <p>The suspect entered a house in the Fifth Ward and fired on officers who were outside, Finner said. No officer was hurt in this shootout, according to police.</p> <p>"He is still in the home and we're treating it as barricaded suspect," Finner said at 6 p.m. local time.</p> <p>During the standoff, the suspect fired "multiple shots" at SWAT officers, none of whom were hit, police said.</p> <p>Around 7:40 p.m., police said on social media that the suspect had been taken into custody.</p> <p>The suspect walked out of the house "with his hands up and surrendered," Finner said during a nighttime press briefing. He had an apparent gunshot wound to the neck and was transported to a local hospital, the chief said.</p> <p>Police were still working to confirm the suspect's identity but believe he lives at the house he barricaded himself inside, according to Finner.</p> <p>Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said he visited each of the officers in the hospital.</p> <p>"All three officers are in good spirits, all were talkative and we expressed our support of them," he said.</p> <p>The injured officers were identified by police using their last names: Officer N. Gadson, 35; Officer D. Hayden, 32; and Officer A. Alvarez, 28.</p> <p>This is the second incident this week in which a law enforcement officer was shot in Houston. Cpl. Charles Galloway of Harris County Constable Precinct 5 was shot and killed on Sunday when the deputy pulled over a car in southwest Houston.</p> <p>Oscar Rosales, 51, who was arrested on Wednesday after fleeing to Mexico, has been charged with capital murder in that shooting.</p>

	<p>As of Jan. 27, four police officers have been killed by gun violence and 24 have been shot and injured according to the Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit that tracks gun violence incidents around the country.</p> <p>Turner and Finner expressed frustration with the rise in gun violence in the city and said they would be formulating a plan in the coming days.</p> <p>"No more excuses. Everybody take an active role ... and do whatever you can do to fight gun violence in our city," Finner said.</p>
<a href="#">Return to Top</a>	

**Information From Online Communities and Unclassified Sources/InFOCUS is a situational awareness report published daily by the Washington State Fusion Center.**

**If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to [intake@wsfc.wa.gov](mailto:intake@wsfc.wa.gov) and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.**

**DISCLAIMER** - the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

**FAIR USE Notice** All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>>

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

[Return to Top](#)